

THE DAY-AFTER DARK



EMERSON GIFFORD TAYLOR



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BY

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Author of "The Long Way Round," "A Daughter of Dale,"
"New England in France 1917-1919"

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CHAPTER I

To such as may inquire about the seed and soil from which this sprig of story sprang, I can give full information. The tale of Crookfinger, Tristram, the orphan child, and the rest, is still current gossip in an old and lovely city; its pictures of life (say competent critics) derive their more solid colors from June moonlight. The gates of Villa Mirador, where Tristram the poet lived, still stand ajar for all to enter who find romance in scenes of antique beauty. His collected works, entitled "Songs of War and of Other Blessings," grace the library shelves of not a few collectors here and abroad. Queen's Wood, of which you will presently hear, is still a part of the vast and historic De Soultre estate; and it is still avoided after dark by those who believe in ghosts. A crowd of copyists—engravers, print-makers, photographers—have tried to catch the elusive beauty of the portrait of Eugenie Louise which, serene and smiling, mysterious and engaging, adorns the "Octagon Room" of the famous little gallery every tourist visits.

The story has been told a score of times, in various forms. More, its scenes, when one thinks of it, are re-enacted almost every day, unconsciously, wherever in this world of ours there meet such restless elements as youth and impulse, or storm and beauty. But I fancy there must have been some special influence abroad, some tricksy spirit in the very air, which, on a certain summer

morning, impelled the poet, and another younger man, and at least one tender maid, to behave in those troublesome, unaccountable ways from which start all the stories in the world.

Just after dawn, when Villa Mirador was still asleep, its master the fine old poet-soldier slipped noiselessly out of the little door which led to the terrace and the inner garden. His errand was very secret; but he was smiling as gaily as a child. Crossing the garden, a place of veritable enchantment, he followed thence a path all overarched with apple boughs, bordered with pink, white, and delicate blue, already murmurous with bees, quivering gold in the early sunshine. At the far end were grouped a dozen lofty beeches, sombre with mystery. Beyond, Tristram traversed a furlong of open land, where the sheep looked up and scattered stupidly at his approach; he panted up a short, steep ledge which masked what was on the further side; he paused an instant on the summit to stretch out his hands wishfully to the distant, higher hills, and then descended to the beginnings of Queen's Wood, ancient and beautiful, which lay just in front of him.

All the length of his sweet journey, leading as it did from one charm to another, Tristram had carried very carefully a jar of honey wreathed in myrtle. And at the rough portal of a certain hollow oak, where such a wood-nymph as silvery Arethusa might have dwelt, the poet left the little jar with certain quaint and old-time rites; and in a nearby golden spring, more clear than glass, he strewed a spray of delicate white roses. They were his offerings, you must understand. To the creatures Tristram was positive inhabited Queen's Wood. It was all very silly of Tristram, of course. He had vastly annoyed his handsome wife Alicia, more than once, by such pagan performances. And she was especially vexed that he had

been tempted to go a-romancing on this particular morning, because she had most important household matters to discuss with Tristram over their coffee.

And further—!

Less than an hour after Tristram had returned to Villa Mirador, there met round a green table in a gilded room of the castle overlooking the clustered little city by the river, six grave graybeards. They were serene from long life and unquestioned power; they were very wise; they never hurried; for years and years they had taken a share in embroiling or composing the affairs of a world. But on this fateful morning, there was not one of these sages but felt himself exceedingly disturbed for no better reason than that a certain young gentleman had neither slept in his bed, nor appeared at the ritual hour for breakfast.

“In short, my dear colleagues,” boomed the Chancellor sonorously, “we are confronted by what even I do not hesitate to term a—a crisis.”

“Do we understand that he—?”

“Yes. Utterly. Completely. He’s nowhere to be found. He’s not been seen since last evening about eleven.”

“This is not the first time.”

“Pardon me, my dear friend. There appears to exist a difference between this and his previous—absences. I used the word ‘crisis.’ With intention. On other occasions I employed the words ‘damned annoyance.’ But this time—”

“What reason—what excuse—what cause does he—?”

For answer, the great man unfolded a sheet of note paper which had been lying on the table in front of him. He displayed its ten lines of pencilled contents over a signature which all the graybeards recognized with awe. Composing himself, his glasses balanced precariously

astride his high, thin nose, he read the note aloud amid a perfect, stricken silence. He read the more impressively because the ten hasty lines contained an explanation of the happening which had so profoundly troubled the customary peace and tranquil elegance of the meetings held in that lofty, gilded room.

"And there you are!" he concluded, with a smile which was very much awry, reverently replacing the letter on the table.

"He demands his Saturdays and holidays off?" repeated one of the old gentlemen in a daze. "The—the forty-four hour week? Incredible! Of course, I say this with all respect. But it is unbelievable."

"And the right to seek and claim his own bride!" exclaimed another, looking about him. "Did I hear aright? This may lead far, my friends. And he declines to work until these—er—demands are—?"

"Precisely."

The scandalized gentleman threw up his hands.

"Briefly, my associates," summed up the Chancellor, with that clarity which for a generation had made him a notable figure at every international council table, "our sovereign's gone on strike!"

The comments which followed this disclosure were less discreet than lively. They did not reveal the ministry in a most creditable light; its members were not in the accommodating mood which should follow the receipt of labor's demands for better conditions and wider privileges. Indeed, the Minister of the Interior (a former coal miner) went so far as to state that, in his opinion, no compromise with such shocking, revolutionary proposals was possible. "He must be made to realize that while he, as a toiler, has rights, he also has responsibilities," declared the Right Honorable Minister, perspiring freely. "I am for locking him out."

“Excellent!”

“But what will be the effect of this—er—absence on the country.” inquired another of the councillors, who had not spoken hitherto.

“Why let it be known?” another countered shrewdly, to which the Chancellor was seen to nod his approval.

“Let us return to what, for the moment, I venture to call the larger considerations,” suggested the head of the conference smoothly. “The peace of half a continent is involved, my dear colleagues, and it is almost time for luncheon.”

A strange morning indeed—!

For at the self-same hour, and not so many miles from the castle which overlooked the little city whence had flown the country’s soul, somebody young and fair and well-brought-up inquired in the most disconcerting manner:—

“Oh, *don’t* you think we’ll meet a highwayman?”

The speaker’s companion in the yellow post-chaise shook her head. She had done twenty miles after a sleepless night at sea, and after a wretched breakfast. She was gray with dust, red with the stifling heat: Her bonnet hung awry. But still did Miss Brick preserve unshaken that correct demeanor by which a governess worthy the name is known the wide world over.

“Certainly not, my treasure,” she chirped emphatically. “Have no fear.”

But there was no fear in the eyes of velvety midnight—Spanish looking eyes—which turned to scan the placid countryside. A tender breast sighed against its prison of stiff black. “Surely,” the softest voice in the little kingdom murmured, “our road will wind o’er lonely heaths, or thread the depths of—of silent and mysterious forests. And when it does—!”

“My pet, what romance have you been reading, un-

known to your devoted Brick? Lonely heaths and forests? Highwaymen?" And the good soul straightened to stare in amazement.

Still the dark eyes strayed from the window of the dusty chaise. "At least," one whispered passionately. "I can always *hope* that things will happen to me."

"There's no reason, my love, for hoping that your road to Villa Mirador does anything but lead straight on."

"A road just like all others."

Such a melancholy little charge as Brick had with her! But she was just nineteen, you see, and vividly lovely; she was traveling away from home for the very first time. It was reasonable, under such circumstances, to expect all sorts of fine adventures. But the sum of all that happened was a jog-trot trip in which one dull hour was exactly like its fellows, each stretch of highway quite like the last, each red-roofed village, patch of woodland, pleasant outlook, just as placid as its predecessors. And so, may not somebody be excused, if her hot tears did brim over?

"My sweet," declared Miss Brick, who was a woman of fine perceptions, "you positively are weeping."

"N-not exactly," came a most uncertain answer. The delicate head was bent so low that the curls of darkest chestnut fell about her cheeks; her slender hands were knit tightly. "But I wish—"

"What, my treasure?"

"Oh, that everything was different!"

To which unseemly outburst Miss Brick made no reply whatever. And in that I have no doubt she chose a course which was both wise and safe. For it is the ancient and hallowed way of all worthy folk to tighten the lips and close the eyes whenever the reckless, the young, or the restless, cry out absurdly about the pains

or hopes in their petulant hearts; and by this means the rebels are decently reduced to silence.

"Let us endeavor," admonished good Brick, after a proper pause, "to be happy in the blessings we already possess. Or in those which are left to us," she added more gently, smitten with a remembrance of the loss her little friend had suffered within the fortnight. Impulsively, she reached out her lean hand, and caught up her companion's, treasuring it. "We must accept the decrees of Providence," was her manner of imparting consolation, "with resignation."

"Y-yes," murmured somebody sweetly mutinous. "But that doesn't seem to *get us* anywhere."

An hour passed. They changed horses at a wayside posting station. Veils were lowered, and at Brick's admonition the girl shrank inconspicuously into her corner of the stuffy carriage, where she could be seen as little as possible, whence she could see, in turn, almost nothing at all. There was a vision of the postillion burrowing thirstily into a pewter pot (which suggested delicious cool and wetness). A tiny tiger cat was idling about, simply waiting to be picked up and cuddled by one who adored kittens. Two pretty country girls were whispering and giggling, to the neglect of their errands—and their secret would have been such fun to share! In the chaise, the heat weighed like a heavy blanket. It helped hardly at all to fan the thick air with the hand. The cushions took hold like so many plasters. Oh, well! At last the sweating horses were changed; the postillion swung himself into the saddle; he gathered up his reins to the admiring glances of the girls. And away he went, up-and-down, posting to his mount's good eight miles an hour. It was something to be gained to be moving any way, anywhere. One hoped that when the chaise should have crept to the top of the next low-crested hill, the look

of the land might change; perhaps there would be a bit of breeze from somewhere. Perhaps—

“No, all as before. To make life even harder, Miss Brick ate mincingly but persistently out of a box of stout sandwiches; she brushed the crumbs here and there. She refreshed herself with a modest but thrice repeated draught from the stone jug of ale which the landlady at last night’s dreadful, seaport inn had thoughtfully provided. “Aren’t you going to peck a bit, my dear?” she invited.

“I—I couldn’t,” answered her companion, drawing back in a kind of horror from the scene of destruction.

And then Miss Brick subsided into silence. Gradually she settled back. Her head tilted to one side. Though her lifted eyebrows did their best to prevent it, her dim eyes closed in peace. Untidy, the box of sandwiches slipped to the floor. And Brick snored! She did. Six times she clicked and gulped, tuning up perhaps, and then began, with full power of trumpets and wind, her ghastly slumber-song. She swayed a bit; she settled against her companion’s shoulder; she stayed there heavily. A jolt of the chaise did no more than tilt her to the left. Her nose got shiny; a strand of grizzled hair streaked down across her shoulder; her bonnet concealed her near eye. She was so very frightful that one planned at first to murder Brick. One considered gravely various methods of getting rid of her, none of which however appeared quite practicable, worse luck. Then, suddenly, one felt little and weak and very much alone in the world. One cried again, because one felt so sorry for the girl who had to endure such dreadful trials.

And then!

Interminably, the road stretched forward between the rows of tall, gaunt poplars. In the far distance appeared a little stone bridge. On the right began a mass of

beautiful, dark woodland; and from this stole a breath of cool, strange breeze. And on its wings, straight from the heart of those mysterious woods, there stole to the weary traveller in the yellow chaise a glorious idea.

“I’ll do it!” she whispered resolutely.

Quickly and quietly, the latch of the chaise door was unfastened. A glance revealed that the postillion was jogging steadily without a thought of what might be transpiring behind him; in the corner Brick still slumbered messily. An inch at a time one moved. The door was opened; skirts were gathered close. For a second the girl stood on the step; and then, light as a bird, silently as a feather, she dropped to the road just as the chaise rocked over the little bridge. A moment, and it had passed beyond call, a purple shadow in a cloud of hot, white dust.

But not till the woods had closed narrowly behind her, not till she reached a place where the gay little stream she followed itself paused to idle and sprawl in a wide-spreading, foam-flecked pool, did the fugitive halt in her headlong flight. And there, with a gasp, she sat down on a fallen log.

“Now what?” she inquired of life in general.

It is merely a question of choosing any of twenty plans or paths, all equally alluring, when you are just nineteen, and brave of heart, and fair to see. If you elect to wander in the forest, after the example of other lost damsels, you invariably encounter the lord of the land after making friends with a wounded fawn with a golden collar. One may choose a return to the high-road, with the delights of gipsying, fortune-telling. What of a house in the woods, where friendly dwarfs take care of you? And is it not known that sometimes you fall in with the Little Folk, and are sure of most surprising times by moonlight?

"But your clothes, my dear," observed the runaway, who was above all practical, "are quite impossible. Nothing could happen to a person dressed as you are. That is why Brick chose these frightful garments, probably. The very first thing to do, is—"

Anyway, she did it. In five minutes, much was accomplished. The stifling veil, the disguising bonnet were hurled away; after a quick spying of the surrounding thickets, she slipped quite clear of her shrouding, prisoning black and silly skirts. They were bothersome to run in; they were never worn by damsels errant anyhow. But in the delicate shawl she wore, brought by some merchant from the lands of spice and gold, it was found possible to punch and tear with a pointed stick a proper hole for the head and two more for a pair of bare, white arms. And this was done; and the resulting garment was belted with twisted withes of willow. Round her head went a circlet of green leafage, while fastened to her waist beneath the converted shawl hung a purse in which lay four gold florins and a lump of colt's foot.

"Now then!" spake Eugenie Louise Buchanan, heiress and beauty, lately from London.

CHAPTER II

SIGHED Alicia, Tristram's wife, for the sixteenth time in the last twelve hours, "I dread the responsibility."

"It is a great one," agreed her husband across the silver, flowers, and delicate service of the luncheon table at Villa Mirador. A blind man would have seen that he was a very elegant gentleman; a boor would have sensed that, along with his air of an aristocrat, Alicia's husband was close kin to the race of rhymesters. "To have Blaise on our hands again is—just what you say."

"You know quite well, my dear, that I don't refer to Blaise. My brother is far from being a responsibility."

Tristram made a little, deferential gesture. But because he lifted his eyebrows at the same moment (which indicated surprise) and pursed his lips (which was a sign that Tristram was about to laugh), even so experienced a wife as Alicia might be pardoned for not feeling exactly sure as to what was passing in her poet-husband's mind.

"What are you hinting?" she demanded briefly. "I'm in no state, Tristram, to enjoy a joke. I'm bothered about money, and this *soufflé* is nothing short of poisonous."

Her husband sat back in his chair. "What's to become of Blaise?" he inquired. "That's what I mean. That's what I've had in mind ever since he descended from the mail coach last night. Unexpectedly."

"I haven't fully decided," evaded Alicia. "His plans are never very definite, but—"

"Not but what Blaise is welcome, of course. Person-

ally," asserted the poet stoutly, "I'm exceedingly fond of him."

The lady in black made no effort to take her husband to task for what, as she was perfectly aware, was perhaps the most profound untruth he had ever uttered. He had disliked her brother from the first moment he laid eyes on him (following Blaise's painful separation from the Royal Military school); the latter referred to Tristram (privately) in terms which would be thought disrespectful even if applied to the late Queen-Regent, the most dreadful old lady imaginable. It was nervous work for Alicia whenever the twain met. And so, if today her husband was inclined to be tolerant about Blaise's informal descent on Villa Mirador, she would be the last to dispute him.

"Blaise," she replied, "is the very least of our troubles. Don't pish-and-pshaw," she admonished sharply. "You don't seem to realize that this is a very critical day."

He yawned, the incorrigible wretch! "My love," returned the master of Villa Mirador, "it is critical indeed."

"But—but what can we *do*?" the lady quavered, a bit querulous.

"The question, as I see it, is what will be done with us, my dear," the poet rejoined with aggravating levity. "When I think of a wholly new element in Villa Mirador—a ruffle on the surface of our delightfully selfish life—." He broke off with a smile and a shake of his head. "Do you recall our adoption of Riri, the puppy?"

"We got rid of *that* little beast, promptly."

"And wisely, unquestionably. But it will hardly be possible to dispose of this new intruder—I don't refer to Blaise—in quite the same way. Riri we gave to the Town Crier. Blaise will take himself away—sooner or later. But our latest acquisition," proclaimed Tristram, "is to remain for better, for worse, and forever."

Alicia rose with a shrug. "It's a plain duty," she announced. "And I've never shirked a duty yet."

"One could tell that, my love, from the most casual glance at you," returned her husband with a little bow. "But," he suggested, "isn't it possible to turn this duty into a pleasure?"

"Tristram," she answered, "your optimism is simply revolting."

"I am as God made me," said the poet. "When does our trial of patience begin?"

"You have the lawyer's letter," replied Alicia, moving away to the window. "At least, I gave it back to you."

"Did you? Oh, yes, I remember," he corrected hastily, catching the meaning of her look. "The letter must be in my desk."

She smiled a bit wearily. "Would it be too much trouble to fetch it? So we can read it over again. In a crisis like the present, everything must be understood clearly from the beginning."

"Right!" He hastened to the door with rather the air of one who wishes to escape from a wrath to come—a deserved wrath, at that. He shook his head and sighed. He departed like one not at all confident of the success of his mission.

"Blessed old stupid!" remarked Tristram's wife. "He's going to be as much help to me in this disaster as a backward child of six."

She wished with all her soul that Blaise were at hand that moment, to give her the advantage of his practical good sense and undying affection. Such an excellent brother! It is true that he had shared in so many of the gaieties of all young men of fashion since the age of fourteen that now, at thirty, he was not a little faded and jaded. He had arrived from town with very meagre baggage and in none too good a temper. Announcing

that he required a long, long sleep, he had disappeared to his usual room almost at once, with only the vaguest explanations of why he had left town; indeed, Alicia had hardly time to exchange more than the briefest greetings before the letter, which came on the same mail coach which set her brother down, had put out of her mind all thoughts save those of the disaster impending over the life she had arranged so comfortably. For the moment, Blaise and his affairs had been thrust into the background. But now Alicia wanted him. Standing at the window, looking down into the glories of Villa Mirador's garden, she felt helpless and alone. Tristram was not to be depended on, and—

Not that Alicia did not love her husband. Did she not share Tristram's house, and adorn the same with her presence? She made his money go surprisingly far: she ministered patiently to his unaccountable (because masculine) preferences regarding food; she had reformed, in the course of the years, a number of his absurd bachelor habits. Indeed, not a day had passed, in twenty years of married life, without her trying to improve him. Hers was a constant if rather frayed hope that some day he would make an effort to improve himself. If she expressed her conviction, as Tristram hurried out of the room, that he was not going to be of the least help in meeting an impending emergency, there is not the slightest doubt but what Alicia was merely telling the truth. It was quite as though she said that her husband's eyes were blue, or his figure remarkable for a man of fifty.

He was gone a long while. Alicia had time to consider all the details of the really lovely prospect which lay below her open window—the masses of bloom, the quivering, chequered shadows of the spreading beech tree, the tinkle of the fountain which some ancestor of

Tristram's had cunningly built below the stone staircase by which one descended from the terrace to the garden. Of this as a spectacle she approved wholeheartedly; it warmed her to know that the inner garden of Villa Mirador was renowned the countryside round. But the color, and the perfume, and the life of the place recalled to her also that Tristram liked to work in it, clad in a hateful straw hat—as he did whenever the mood was on him to talk, as he pretended he could, with the flowers. It was of a piece with his stealing off at daybreak this very day to Queen's Wood to meet some absurd creature of fairyland. Her thoughts travelled beyond the garden wall, through the park, and along the highway, toward the beautiful estate of the Gerouvilles, toward the house occupied by Oswald de Soulter since his return from his travels in the East, where his father had sown the seed of the millions which Oswald was now prudently harvesting. She wondered what Marcelle de Gerouville or Oswald would have to say about her own and Tristram's coming troubles. If she only knew—! I think it was because Alicia was such a good woman that God answered her latest prayer immediately.

“Good morning!” A youthful figure, dressed in the height of elegance, advanced with the bow and step of one who was at home in drawing rooms. “My dearest sister, how wonderfully black becomes you!”

“Are you rested?” she asked, her eyes dwelling fondly on her brother's perfections.

Blaise gestured joyously. “My room? A bower. My bed? A temptation. My coffee? A kiss from Arabia. My valet? Beyond my hopes. The result? As you see.”

“And your brains?” she queried.

“Tempered steel,” said Blaise. “Clockwork. A reser-

voir of ideas, at your service." He lowered his black eyes. "I regret the mixed metaphors."

"Sit down," returned Alicia promptly. "I'm delighted to hear it. I have a great deal to tell you."

But hardly had Blaise disposed himself, correct, attentive, grave, as became one to whom were to be entrusted the deep secrets of life at Villa Mirador, before he was again on his feet in the approved attitude of an erring but repentant brother awaiting the remarks of a male relative disposed to be disagreeable.

"I can't understand it," said Tristram with deep concern, as he stormed in. Alicia, from her place at the window, did not look round, but her back was eloquent. "Are you perfectly sure you gave me the letter, my dear?"

"Perfectly sure," she returned calmly. "Have you looked in your fish creel?"

"Alicia!" protested the poet.

"I can't help recalling," she murmured with a look at Blaise which was illuminating, "that I found that lost package of your father's valuable papers in your game bag, underneath three quite dead partridges. Your brother-in-law," she observed to Blaise with a patient smile, "is unchanged."

"Can I be of service?" offered the newcomer with easy deference. "Something lost that I can help hunt for? A letter, you say?"

"I can't possibly have *lost* it," Tristram objected heatedly. "But—"

"But in the rush of affairs, or before the imperious demands of your muse, sir, who will not be denied, you have for the moment forgotten—"

"Exactly," replied Tristram. "You've hit it. I was busy last night in the garden. Talking with the anemones. Very important."

"Let me be of assistance, then. Perhaps, in my small way, I can be of real use to you. At last," he added with decent contrition, lowering his voice.

Before Tristram could answer, Alicia clapped her hands—once, as if she had struck a bell. "Good!" she cried warmly. "The very thing." She nodded to Tristram, then to Blaise. "My brother will act as your private secretary, my love," she decreed, "from this moment forward."

"Secretary?" repeated the poet, babbling.

"I—?" the other stammered.

"An excellent arrangement," decided the capable mistress of Villa Mirador. "Blaise, your attention! You will take entire charge of Tristram's correspondence, accounts, engagements, hours for business, moments of relaxation, amusements, exercise, choice of clothes, and attendance at divine worship."

"But what do I do?" asked the poet humbly.

"Poetize," his wife said in reply.

"Is there anything I don't do?" asked her brother anxiously.

"The management of the household," said Alicia, "I will retain as usual." She blessed them both with one of her rare smiles. "That's all. Everything's arranged. Go with Tristram, my dear Blaise, at once, and begin your new duties. It is of first importance to find a letter from a certain London lawyer which came to Tristram yesterday. I will meet you in the garden in ten minutes."

The men looked at each other questioningly.

"Do you accept me, sir?" Blaise inquired, with a deprecatory smile.

"I've never owned a secretary," said the poet, "but—certainly," cried Tristram, giving Blaise his hand. His

face was lighted up like a mischievous schoolboy's. "I think—I know—there's fun ahead."

With that exchange, the gentlemen took their leave, Blaise stepping aside ceremoniously to give his new employer the precedence through the door; and, after listening an instant to the sound of their voices from an adjacent room, which Tristram used as his study, Alicia went out on the terrace and thence down to the garden. She had not long to wait.

"We found it!" called Tristram, emerging from the house. He was alone. She wondered vaguely how he had disposed so promptly of his new assistant. "It was tucked in a book I was reading. Blaise discovered it—monstrous clever fellow."

She smiled in calm triumph. "I knew," said Alicia, "that you needed someone to assist you in your labors. Now read me the letter, like a sensible thing."

"It will be a pleasure, too, for the garden folk to hear what's in store," said Tristram heartily, looking about him.

"And your friends in the woods, too?" she added drily.

"The fairies will rejoice at the news," said her husband with decision.

Alicia held herself tightly. She shut her eyes. The righteous storm of her indignation passed without her fond husband being in the least aware of how nearly he had come to being struck by lightning right where he stood. "Read," she ordered, when she could trust her voice. "We must have everything understood from the beginning."

"What will be the first thing to do," asked Tristram, as he unfolded the sheet of paper, "in the face of this—disaster?"

His wife smiled acidly. "In two minutes I must leave

you, to see that everything's in readiness. In the north—the blue room." She stopped short, then resumed, as if correcting herself for some thought. "That will serve for the present. Until we decide just what is going to happen."

"That little room next yours is—sunnier," hinted Tristram. But as his capable helpmate made no reply at all (and he waited until it was quite sure that she was not going to), he cleared his throat, took a proper pose, and prepared to read once more the announcement which had thrown Villa Mirador into so fine a flutter.

"Hark!" he exclaimed suddenly. From where they were seated, they commanded a view of the driveway which came sweeping up to the edge of the garden from the park and the gates beyond. "Wasn't that—?"

"Possibly," assented Alicia. She continued to embroider; but her fingers moved more rapidly than before. She lifted her fine eyebrows; but her breath came a shade more quickly.

The poet rose to his feet. There came from the park the clip-clop of hoofs on a hard road and the whir of swift wheels. "At last!" he sighed.

"I suppose so!" With another sigh, but of a different sort, his wife buried her needle in the linen stretched on the tambour frame, and packed the whole into her flowered bag. And hardly had she done so when a dusty, yellow post-chaise swung into view, with sweating horses and flogging postillion. From the window leaned a gaunt lady in black. Her extraordinary bonnet was fearfully askew; and shrilly she ordered the postillion to pull up. Open flew the door; down fell the folding step; and across the garden, with outstretched arms and wild eyes, hastened such a figure of fright and bewilderment that even Alicia rose to her feet with an exclamation.

"Oh—oh!" wailed the apparition.

"Do come and sit down," invited Tristram gently, supporting the distracted lady to a seat without further ado. "I perceive before you speak, that you've a story to tell of the very greatest interest."

"Oh, sir—!" gasped the stranger, her two hands pressed to her heart.

"There, my dear soul, there!" the poet soothed, administering friendly pats on the thin shoulder under the rusty, dusty mantle. "Calm yourself, I beg."

"In the meantime," said Alicia, "I'll question the postillion."

"A villain!" cried the lady vehemently, restored at once to reason. "He drove me here with remarks reflecting on my intelligence as unjust as they were blasphemous."

"You have had an accident?" asked Tristram, in a voice to win confidence from a tiger.

"The horror of it all!" came the wailing answer.

"Decidedly I shall question the man," said Alicia. "Unless"—and she fixed the visitor's attention by a kind of lunge of the flowered embroidery bag—"you tell us this instant who you are and what you're talking about."

"I was asleep," the stranger quavered, after a pause in which she sought to recover her composure by dabs at her eyes and temples with a wet twist of gray material which might once have been a handkerchief.

"When? Last night?"

The other pointed to the chaise.

"Ah!" commented Tristram. "In the carriage. You fell asleep. Perfectly clear. Hot day, and so on."

"Yes, and I was deceived!" cried the dusty lady tartly. "Little did I think, when I yielded to the demands of exhausted nature, that another would take advantage of my state!" And the good creature dissolved in tears which were shockingly unbecoming.

"If you would tell us your name," suggested Tristram, "we could judge more accurately. My own," he added, "is Tristram de Cordelaer, and this is Villa Mirador."

The heart-broken lady dried her tears. "Ah!" she sighed with an air of profound relief. "In that case, you will be expecting me." And she smiled upon them brightly.

"You?" screamed Alicia, recoiling.

"You?" echoed Tristram, fumbling for the letter. "My God!"

"Exactly!" assured the stranger.

"Impossible!" broke from Alicia. "Oh, Tristram, I prophesied disaster."

But the poet, made of firmer stuff than one would fancy, still persisted. Trembling in every limb, he sought for the last chance. "Tell us the worst," he ordered of the disheveled creature before him. "Are you in truth the orphan child—daughter of my late lamented sister?"

The other bridled. "I, sir?" she parried hotly.

"Tell us!"

"No, sir!" There was a scorn and indignation in her voice which both reassured and disconcerted. "Until two hours ago, I was the guardian of that young person, but now—"

"Then where is Eugenie Louise? Have you lost her?" demanded Alicia, in the queerest accent of hope imaginable.

"Yes!" sobbed good Miss Brick.

CHAPTER III

THE hours which followed were confused indeed. Upon the beautifully ordered life of Villa Mirador the effect produced was that of a particularly disagreeable earthquake. The prospect of an endless visitation from an unknown, draggled orphan had been bad enough; but—the paradox!—it was worse to be told that the unwelcome waif had disappeared *en route*, and now was roaming at large.

“If only we could arrange matters with decency!” moaned Alicia, who by nightfall had begun to show the strain. They were holding council on the terrace, the night being fine despite some slowly sailing clouds which held the threat of a change. “As it is,” she continued wearily, “the whole countryside will know tomorrow that one of Tristram’s young relatives is lost. Strolling along the road like a gypsy! A runaway. The look of the thing! It is atrocious. Her behavior shows an exceedingly bad bringing up. Though I’m sure,” she concluded lamely, “Miss Brick has done what she could.”

“Madame flatters!” sighed the guardian. Refreshed, she had shed gentle tears of gratitude for the kindness of her hosts, of chagrin that her charge had escaped, of compassion for the rebellious lamb now wandering in the night alone. It is likely that her tender and exemplary feelings had been deepened a bit by the mellow Coté d’Or with which attentive Anthony had brimmed her thin-stemmed Venice glass at dinner.

“It is positively amazing,” observed Blaise, breaking a somewhat strained silence, “but, do you know, I have never heard of Eugenie Louise Buchanan?”

"Tristram knew she existed."

"Vaguely. Only vaguely," returned the poet, a bit impatiently. He was tired of defending himself. Heaven knew that he was not to blame for the upset which had occurred. "One's sisters in England are forever having scores of children. The most commonplace incidents. My sister Amelia, who married Buchanan, was exceptional in that she—. The wanderer *is* my late sister's only child?" he inquired of Brick.

"The sole blossom on that branch of your family tree, sir," chirped the governess, interrupted in the comfortable yawn she had ventured to indulge under cover of the darkness. "And she is perfection. If madam will allow me to express an opinion. Though I say it who shouldn't."

"And now this paragon is sent to Villa Mirador!" mused Blaise aloud. "Why?"

"Exactly!" echoed Alicia. She shook her head in dismal foreboding. "That's what I've wondered from the first."

"Well, why not?" her husband objected stubbornly. "The child had nowhere else to go. Buchanan dies; her mother has been dead for years; there was no other near relative but myself. And—"

"And you're known to be generous; and you're thought to be rich," his wife concluded shortly. "An excellent stroke of business!"

"As to that," smiled the poet in the darkness, "blessed if I haven't forgotten to tell you something, Alicia."

"Another bit of bad news?"

"That's a matter of opinion. But it appears, as a matter of fact, that this wretched orphan is not what one would call destitute, you know."

Alicia came upright in her chair. "Tristram, what are you telling me?"

Blaise made no sign; but one could be sure that, like all good secretaries, he was listening.

"Miss Brick informed me just before dinner," Tristram explained. "I think, miss, you said you saw Mr. Buchanan's will?"

"Yes," admitted the vestal. "As a humble witness to his signature. And one can hardly help reading any document that one signs, even though business prudence forbids it." She preened herself a bit, not sorry to have caused a flutter. "Of course I may be wrong, but I think—I *think*—my late employer left his whole estate to his daughter. And his ventures, I have been told, were most successful." She smoothed down her dress over her knees. "A poor, weak woman can be expected to know very little," she simpered, veiling her eyes, "but I heard it said by the lawyer-gentlemen in London that—"

"Go on, pray!" urged Alicia, as Miss Brick hesitated.

"I should dislike to feel that I was guilty of any breach of confidence," the dame demurred, pinching her lips. "But—"

"You *know* you're among *friends* here," the other lady assured her warmly. "And—and Eugenie Louise is one of the family, in a way."

"I'm sure you'd have been kind to her, even if she was poor, wouldn't you, madame?" bleated Brick.

"Of course."

And now you know she's rich—"

"Get on, get on!" whispered Blaise. "How much do you guess she's got—eh?"

"I only tell what I *know*," the guardian corrected. Then she lowered her voice to the level of good, cozy gossip. "The gentlemen did say, in my hearing, when there was talk of Mr. Buchanan's will and so on, that he'd accumulated—oh, dear, it seems incredible, with him

so quiet a gentlemen. But it's the quiet folks who do get things done in the world!" she sighed contentedly. "When I think that my late employer left as much as half a million—"

"No!" cried Alicia.

"Half a million?" echoed Blaise in a queer, strained voice. "In pennies?"

"Pennies indeed, sir, begging your pardon!" cried Brick indignantly. "Golden crowns, sir!"

"An actual heiress!" exclaimed Alicia, her tone hushed to one of decent respect. "Do you hear, Tristram?"

"Yes—yes," he answered hastily from his place in the darkness. "Something about money. Tell me, Miss Brick, whom does the child resemble?" asked the poet of the stray lamb's guardian.

"An heiress, Blaise!" repeated Alicia, as if the very word held a fascination. "*That* being the case—"

"By all means!" her brother agreed instantly, sensing her thought. "If I may venture the suggestion, my dear sister, I think we certainly ought to be moving."

"Hours have been wasted," declared the lady of Villa Mirador, looking about her accusingly. "Why wasn't this known before? The Royal Rurals must get word instantly—an alarm, you know. Get one of them up here from the barracks. Anthony!" she called to the hovering footman. "What on earth have we been waiting for, Tristram?"

"For Eugenie Louise," the poet answered amiably. But his wife did not hear him. Already she was pouring out directions to Anthony to go at once to police headquarters and fetch back with him one of the best and keenest officers available—on a matter of the greatest urgency. "We ought to offer a reward, too," she added with decision.

Until good gossip Brick had made her latest and most

stunning revelation, it seemed that everything really necessary to recover a strayed orphan had been done. The situation was difficult. One hates to proclaim family troubles to the world by the town crier; people would ask questions. There came dark moments when one doubted if it were worth taking too much trouble in any case about a heedless, headstrong girl, of whom one knew absolutely nothing beyond what was reported by her doting old fool of a governess. A very fishy tale altogether!

"I'll tell the butterflies a fairy is lost," Tristram had offered briskly, as soon as Brick had told of her charge's disappearance. "And the birds. They can help find the child. They will guide her home."

"A very good suggestion," approved Alicia. "So like you, my dear, to think up something practical. We'll do exactly as you say. I'm for leaving this—fairy to—"

"Ahem!" cautioned Blaise, with a half glance at the still sniffling Brick. And so a little further reflection was spent on the matter. And presently, away flew a gold and azure butterfly in the direction of Queen's Wood with Tristram's message; and down the highway rode a brace of farm-lads charged to search the country for a lost young lady in black—and to keep still about it. But now these earnest efforts seemed not good enough.

"The first thing in the morning," decreed Alicia, "we will search for our strayed darling in earnest."

"But while we sit here discussing her," Blaise observed with unusual animation, "anything may happen. I gather that the missing heiress is young. And fair. Everything will happen," prophesied Blaise with gloomy decision. "Don't you think our search should start immediately? Let me go."

“Please!” entreated Brick.

His sister tried to see his face in the dark. “Nothing is ever gained by too much hurry,” she reminded them, though still out of breath from her hasty commands to Anthony. “We must use method and—and caution in this strange affair.”

“The fairies will do their best,” asserted Tristram comfortably. “And if it doesn’t rain till morning—”

“Let us be going inside,” said Alicia with a shiver. She rose, and gathered her silks about her. “I feel a bit chilly. And I’m sure Miss Brick has much to tell me. Will you let me know, my dear, when the Royal Rural arrives?” And she swept away, graceful and easy, with Miss Brick tottering in her train.

The gentlemen soon followed. Even as they sat there, discussing ways and means, there had come a change over the summer night. The moon was hazy. From the sea there stole across the land a breeze which shepherded a flock of surly, heavy clouds. From tall trees in the park came restless whisperings and rustles, a million leaves all listening to the breeze a-tilt, thirstily. The glow of candles in the room where Anthony, according to habit, had set out his master’s nightly game of picquet, was comforting; the dark, high-panelled walls embraced the poet and his secretary as they entered.

“Rain by morning,” declared Tristram, as he sat down at the marquetry table. “Unless tomorrow brings further surprises. This girl now!” And he shook his head wonderingly. “I, with a private secretary!” he marvelled. Glancing up, Blaise was aware that the older man was studying him. He had the queerest expression in his eyes—half grave concern, half whimsical amusement. Beastly race, these poets! It is so hard to tell what the creatures are thinking about. “It’s quite understood that my secretary is my very own, isn’t he?”

quoth Tristram, riffling the cards, still watching the other's waxy, foxy face.

"Of course, sir," Blaise assured him cordially. "My sister Alicia said—"

"It will be generally desirable to listen to what *I* say," replied Tristram gently. "Not but what dear Alicia is the brains of the household, of course. But I think we'll make it rather a principle, Master Blaise, that my secretary takes his instructions from me. Understood?"

"Perfectly, sir. I hope that tomorrow you'll tell me exactly what I'm to do."

"Never fear!" The kindly twinkle in his blue eyes lighted up again. "I'll use you." He broke off to listen. There sounded a patter on the leaves of the ivy outside the tall casement. "Rain already!" shivered the poet. "That's bad. About this lost niece of mine. What's your idea of the best way to go in search of her, Blaise?"

The secretary shrugged. He would not make the mistake of offering his own services a second time. "Pretty hard to make real progress in the dark," he answered doubtfully. "There's so little to go on. Unless Alicia gets more information from old Brick yonder. Apparently the young lady simply vanished from the chaise into thin air. Wait for the gendarmes, sir. That's best, under the circumstances."

"I've a plan of my own in mind," the poet said slowly. What was it made him smile so? "It ought to get results. I'll think it over. Good heavens, what a lot of things we've had to think about this day!" He began dealing. "As to your duties as my secretary, Blaise, you'll hear from me the very first thing in the morning. In the mean time—"

"I was thinking how comfortable we are!" smiled

the secretary, who knew how to please. "Wonderful old place, Tristram!"

His employer followed Blaise's appraising look about the room. "Glad you like it," he answered warmly. "It's a good point in your character, young man. Of course it's natural that I should love everything connected with Villa Mirador."

"Because your family—?"

"Exactly." The poet smiled quaintly, laying down his cards. "I love it, because my great-grandfather's uncle built the new wing. New!" he repeated with relish. "Did you know that it was *his* grandfather who commenced the house? This part. Where we're sitting, waiting for Eugenie Louise Buchanan. I am the seventh de Cordelaer to live in it. Splendid old ghosts in every corner, Blaise!" he assured his companion with high relish. "Ha! A murder, too. Henry de Cordelaer, my great-uncle. And love stories? By the score. My great-grandfather Godfrey, for instance, when he was a youngster, and Madame X—. She was very beautiful. And wilful. Great grandfather was packed off on a voyage to the Indies. He was eighteen and she twenty-four. Madame X—! We've never called her by any other name, for the boy wouldn't tell, you know. The King of France's fellow —what's his name?—painted her portrait as somebody mythological. Four years later, Godfrey rode away from this house to the wars, at the head of his dragoons. He'd married Eugenie de Marnac. She bore him his eldest son at Villa Mirador, on the day of Albuerne, the day her husband lost his arm in battle. See? That's what I mean. That sort of thing. Villa Mirador's my home, you understand. A real one."

I dare say that Blaise deplored—as must any up-and-coming person—such weakness on his employer's part.

We know nothing so inefficient, so nearly contemptible, as sentimentality. Had Tristram felt pride in his house as a beautiful bit of architecture, he had been excusable. The very foremost critics and professors cited the new wing as a perfect example of its period's best style; there was something undeniably handsome in the warm colors, fine proportions, and quaintly carved details of the portion built by the Italian craftsmen brought into the country by the spendthrift seventeenth century prince, whose name Blaise had forgotten. Its owner could treasure Villa Mirador like a jewel, and be understood; he could refer to it as a valuable piece of realty, and win respect. But the poet loved the place merely because his family had lived in it for generations.

"Perfectly!" agreed Blaise very civilly, terribly afraid he would be called on to undergo a trial he remembered. He might be called on to see and admire for the eleventh time Gran'ther Godfrey's sabre, or the letter from the sovereign, so famous in history for his purity that this epistle—to Henry de Cordelaer—was said to contain his only written indelicacy, or the lace which came from some dead king to a de Cordelaer bride. There existed a mass of such sentimental rubbish in a vast oak press against the further wall. "Dear God, not that!" prayed Blaise most heartily. And he recalled his employer to their game by the simple expedient of dropping three cards to the floor, and making profuse apologies for his clumsiness. An hour later, and Tristram had bid his secretary good night. Again he wore that hateful, masking smile.

From a far, dim distance came to Blaise's ears a horrid noise. "Tap-tap and tap," it said to him. Centuries before, in some land of make-believe, one had heard it. Queer, that it is heard now, again—"tap—tap"—here, when one is aware of a deep, warm bed, and of a

pale dawn filtering in at the window. He shut his eyes resolutely. Why curse what was nothing but an evil dream?

"Mr. Blaise, sir. Tap-tap. Beg your pardon, sir, but—"

"What is it?"

Horrible place, Villa Mirador! He had planned to be comfortable during his exile; he had hoped to profit by his ridiculous engagement as secretary to the poet. Was it possible that the devil at the door was bringing his morning chocolate?

"Come in!" he yawned, closing his eyes again.

A gloomy voice broke the silence. "The master's compliments, sir, and he hopes you have slept excellently."

"Not badly. Anything else?"

"The master's compliments to his secretary, sir."

At that Blaise opened an anxious eye. "Eh—?" he inquired.

"His secretary will start on his new duties immediately, sir."

The victim struggled up in bed. Opposite him stood Anthony, deferential as always, but planted, it was plain to see, as obstinately as an oak. "What duties?" Blaise demanded. His head whirled. It must be the middle of the night. He was a sick man. If that old idiot of a poet expected him to—. "What do you mean, imbecile?"

"Thank you, sir. You are to start a search for the lost young lady. The master directed me to say that he thought your idea a very good one, and that he much appreciated your generous offer. His compliments, sir, and you will start at once. You will go to Queen's Wood, alone and on foot, making careful inquiries at every farm house and along the road."

"Now?" stammered Blaise. "Before breakfast?"

"The master was most positive, sir."

"Where are the gendarmes?"

"All busy, sir."

"What time is it?" groaned the secretary.

"Just gone five, sir."

"And the weather?"

"Raining, sir," said Anthony firmly. "Like the very devil, sir," he added on a note of encouragement, but with a suspicion of a most devilish grin.

CHAPTER IV

Now for a few pages about her whom some may have already guessed to be our heroine. Keen as the runaway was to be off on her great adventure, still, on the very threshold of the enchanting unknown, she hesitated. Not that she felt the lightest chill of fear, you must understand. One look at her glowing eyes and brave little chin would give answer enough on that score. Nor, it must be confessed, was the wanderer conscious of any inclination to return to the road, overtake the toiling, dusty chaise, and comfort her probably frantic guardian. For beloved Brick, and the way she had, made up two principal reasons for running away at all. And we have been at some pains to show how very handsomely equipped she was to meet whatever fortunes were in store for her. If for a moment after completing her change of costume she stood quite motionless, looking about her with an air of puzzled doubt, it was merely because she had suddenly felt the need of a dependable guide.

At most turns of the road, as she knew full well, one has only to heed the counsels of the heart, to avoid going astray; but at the present parting of the ways, the very crowd of other pleasant advisers surrounding her made choice a little difficult.

“Follow me!” cried the smiling, chuckling brook, as it danced away down the glen.

The old trees whispered confidential secrets, and pointed with long waving fingers.

The breeze which shepherded the clouds would be

happy, so he sighed, to shepherd also a strayed damsel to whatever land she chose to name beyond the edge of the world.

"Stay where you are," the honest sunshine counselled, covering her with gold and glory.

But none of these newfound friends, agreeable as they were, seemed quite reliable. And so at length she decided to choose her direction by what has often proved the best method in the world (albeit old-fashioned), when really important decisions have to be reached. Selecting a branch from a nearby hazel bush, she broke it off, and setting one end on the ground, she steadied the other by the lightest touch of her middle finger. She would close her eyes, and let the branch fall. And in whatever direction it pointed, she would follow.

But as she stood there, eyes shut tight, warm lips parted in a smile over the words of a magical incantation she repeated, something started her. A touch, lighter than a kiss yet more than the breeze's, brushed her cheek. She glanced up. A gold and azure butterfly had poised himself on the back of her outstretched hand. There he lingered, just long enough for her to guess why he had been sent to her. Then spreading his wings, he twinkled away, following the marge of the brook. I think that Tristram, had he known, would have been proud of his messenger's fidelity.

"I'm not sure of your name," called the fugitive after the flying bit of splendor, "but thanks very much for your help. The wand," she observed as she dropped it disdainfully, "can point in only one direction. While you," she cried to her newest friend most gratefully, "can lead a body almost anywhere."

For the moment however, the butterfly followed a course as straight as the brook's. Without a pause it guided the runaway ever deeper through the forest, down the

little valley. Not once it halted, though a thousand times it must have been tempted to follow the natural way of men with work on hand, which is to rest or gossip. But presently the way was blocked. A thick tangle of shrubs and wild grape vine extended clear across the path, leading down to the brookside from some ferny ledges on the right. For an instant she saw the butterfly bright against the greenery of the bushes; but an instant later he had vanished, as if suddenly made invisible. And so, aware that butterflies never deceive those who follow them trustingly, the wayfarer knew that her guide had ended the special task which had been given him.

"He has done his duty," she said quite loyally. "But he does leave me rather in the dark." She considered the barrier across her path. "No further?" she mused. But deciding, as is the way of youth everywhere, that to stop was mere nonsense, that doubtless a new world began, as always on the far side of the barrier, she tossed her thanks into the air, and threaded her way as best she could through the thicket. Not without scratches, not without more than one rip in her funny clothes. I fear that her temper was just a little ruffled before finally she won through, and found herself once more in the open, only to find that again her way down the brook was blocked, and by the last obstacle in the world she expected to encounter. Noiselessly, she dropped back into the cover of the thicket. And then, parting the leaves, she watched with startled eyes and a heart which commenced to beat extremely rapidly.

Ten yards away, she saw a youth. He was lying face down beside the brook. He was absolutely motionless. One bare brown arm was extended; he appeared to be holding something suspended just above the water; his eyes were fixed on the pool. Quiet as he lay, the pose of his slim figure suggested that every muscle was tense

as a spring. For minutes he lay there. She had begun to believe that he must be asleep.

"Or probably," she corrected, recalling the fairy tales, "he has drunk of the brook and been turned to stone."

Hastily she tried to remember the means by which evil spells are broken. But suddenly her doubts and fears were set at rest. With a swift jerk of his arm, the youth swung clear of the water a flashing, silvery shape in a noose of hair; and with a pounce like the panther's for quickness he prisoned in both hands a splendid trout where it had landed among the ferns.

"Good!" she called to him with enthusiasm.

You protest, dear madam? And you, sir—do you lift your eyebrows? You do not believe me, truly, you do no wrong to expect an explanation of, or excuse for our heroine's cry of generous applause and admiration. Let us get along with our story. It is perfectly true that, when first she saw the young man, she shrank back in an access of that proper dismay which, we are told, is common to all females of refinement on meeting a man alone and in the wildwood. It is understood also that our heroine was the perfect flower of a household wealthy, distinguished, of lineage unblemished, of manners most polished. Granted then, without debate, it is incredible that she could have called so gaily to the stranger by the brookside. No really nice girl would have done so. Her action was against all nature. But it was rather jolly of her, after all. And fancy the effect on the fisherman, as he saw emerge from the thicket and advance toward him what I feel sure was the quaintest, most engaging figure in all the kingdom.

"Who may you be?" he inquired, looking up with a frown from where he knelt on the turf, the shining trout in front of him.

"The only interesting part of my name is Eugenie

Louise," she answered, suddenly halting, as if aware that she had intruded. But she could not draw back. "What's yours?" she countered.

"Crookfinger." He flung the name at her like a stone.

"How—how suitable!" she whispered, lost in admiration. "I'm sure you are a famous thief, and—"

The youth scrambled to his feet. He glanced over his shoulder; he slouched toward the girl with a swing of his well-set shoulders. He spoke through his teeth, his jaw set truculently.

"If I am a thief, what are you going to do about it?"

"I suppose," she replied, "that my manner should be extremely distant."

"Where's the harm in lifting a couple of trout?"

"Nowhere," she answered quite truthfully. "Anything that's done well is well worth doing—so I've been taught. And—you really mustn't look so angry." she continued quickly, delighted that she could be so brave. "I think it's splendid to be a thief. Haven't you a knife about you? Haven't you often plunged it into the heart of some fat citizen?"

He put his hands behind him. He settled himself more firmly on his feet; he cocked his head like an inquisitive puppy. "Are you crazy?" was his heartfelt inquiry. "Or am I?"

"Perhaps we both are," she answered happily, reminding herself of how she must look at the moment—garlanded, dressed in an India shawl with three holes punched in it. "I'm sure," she said, "that we're alike in other respects. For instance, if you're a thief, I am a criminal also." And she smiled like spring sunshine.

"You?" he stammered.

"An escaped criminal," she amended emphatically.

"What?" He was dazed.

"Yes. I'm desperate. I—I crave your assistance.

I've just run away from a wicked witch. She was taking me to prison where I'd have to stay forever and ever. Seizing a moment however when my guardian slumbered," she went on after a swallow, "I pried open the iron-barred door of my stifling cell. To the watch-dog I offered a piece of drug-soaked calf's liver. The warder at the outer gate I bribed with my necklace of pearls. And then—"

"Say no more," the youth entreated, flinging up his hands as if to defend himself. He dropped to his knees and bowed his head to the earth. "Take me as your faithful slave," he begged, "for never in all my chequered career have I met so wonderful a liar as yourself."

"I never owned a slave. I'm not sure I'd know what to do with one."

"You order him to do things," he informed her lucidly. "And he obeys."

She eyed the stranger doubtfully. "Anything I want?"

"Anything!" cried Crookfinger with enthusiasm.

She considered. It seemed a long, long time before she spoke. "To try you out with something simple at first," she said at length composedly, "I order—"

"Anything!" he cried again.

"I order that you change me into a boy."

He started.

"A boy!" she insisted positively. "I think that the life would suit me."

"But why—?"

She turned away with a shrug of the shoulders. "You're a most unsatisfactory slave. From your own statement, I was led to believe in your instant obedience. But—you don't even stir."

Again he grovelled, knocking his forehead against the

ground. "Pardon, O queen!" he faltered. Then he scrambled to his feet; his quick, dark eyes were all alight with dancing glee. "A boy you shall be, or as good as a boy, as soon as the enchantment can be managed. Do you stay here. For a short time I leave you; but when I return—"

"Were I sure," she murmured, "that you would ever return—"

"Oh, but you are!" he answered. "I'm leaving my trout. And I'm certain to come back for them, in any case, for they're going to be dinner. Which you will share with your slave, if you'll be so very kind."

"Dinner?" she echoed blissfully. "Oh, hurry!"

With a laugh he turned away. With a wave of the hand he started off on the run. Before she could count ten, he had disappeared into the forest.

"He *did* become invisible," insisted Eugenie Louise, sitting cross-legged on the grass with a sigh of mingled happiness and relief. "Today, I intend to believe everything."

And indeed it did seem magical, the short time before the youth came panting back. Under one arm he carried a bundle, and under the other was hugged a little mirror.

"The transformation," he explained with glowing pride, as he laid the bundle at her feet with a fine flourish. "And here is a mirror in which you can see for yourself how the charms will work. Yonder is a most comfortable rock, and there I propose to sit, looking at the landscape, until you say it's time to turn round. With these most simple charms," he continued, pointing to the package, "and with the exercise of a little goodwill, you shall be changed in two minutes from Eugenie Louise into—"

"Bob the Bullet," she suggested, suddenly inspired. "Quite so," he answered steadily. "To hear is to

obey." And once more he turned his straight and sinewy back, and strode away to his perch on the rock, a hundred feet distant.

With a little gasp she unrolled the bundle. There were revealed a loosely collared shirt, and the sturdiest of shoes and stockings. She beheld a hat. She was dazzled by the sight of a pair of green velveteen breeches. "I never dreamed," she murmured disconsolately, "that boy's clothes were so hideous." Her heart sank. It was the look of the hat which principally daunted her. "Don't be absurd!" she scolded, with a shake of her head, and began forthwith to wrestle with the knot in the belt of willow withes which confined her woodland costume. "In the first place, it would be rude in me not to accept this gift, for he has behaved very nicely indeed, I think. Secondly, it is written that this is to be a day of adventures. And—it's possible I won't look badly in —those garments, after all." The girdle was cast aside. If, for a moment, she paused critically inspecting her slave's impassive back, she felt at the same time a flush of contrition that she did not take this utter and vaguely formidable stranger strictly at his word. "If he said he wouldn't look round, he won't," declared Eugenie Louise positively. But all the same she made the interval between dropping her shawl and thrusting herself into the Novelties extremely brief. She was sure that the slave would not look; but it was hardly credible that the sunshine or the squirrels would be equally honorable and polite. By the time the last button was fastened, she was breathless; and she was furious with herself because she knew that her cheeks were flaming. She needed the comfort which a critical, lingering look in the mirror gave, quite to restore her serenity. But marking the trim and careless figure, the white throat showing above the loose collar, the quaintness of her curls close

bound beneath the hat brim, noting that the velveteens were anything but unbecoming—

“You may come,” called Bob the Bullet to his fellow ruffian.

The latter leaped to his feet as if the word had stung him. He advanced with the pleasantest grin imaginable. And he never remarked once on her appearance—an omission which made her feel warmly appreciative of his tact yet exceedingly vexed at his obtuseness.

“I—I’m all ready,” she announced briskly if vaguely. She crossed her arms with her hands hugging the outer curve of her shoulders, which is not the boyish way of folding one’s arms at all. Nor do boys stand with one knee advanced but tightly pressed against its fellow, toeing in dreadfully.

But Crookfinger, the savage thief, was quite perfect. He did not enquire what she was ready for; he did not consult her wishes; he simply took charge. Which is immensely helpful, when a fellow is beginning to feel a thousand miles from anywhere.

“Go make those girl’s clothes into a bundle,” he directed. “They may come in handy some day. You could sell ‘em.”

“I’ve got some others a little way up the brook.”

“Go get ‘em.”

“Where will you be?”

“Right here,” he assured her with a smile. “It’s time to start dinner.”

“I could make macaroons,” proffered Bob the Bullet, “if only I had the materials.”

“We’ll have some,” replied Crookfinger nodding darkly. “When we get settled. In—in the den.”

“Oh—!” she thrilled. “A truly den? Of robbers?”

“There was one other robber in it,” said Crookfinger, suddenly sticking out his under jaw, and advancing a

shoulder. "But he didn't get on with me. He was too soft." He jerked his head backward. "Show you his bones at the foot of the cliff, if you'd like to see 'em," he invited cordially.

"Oh—! You—you pushed him over?"

The ruffian laughed briefly. "He made a big mistake to cross *my* path, he did, the dash-blanked-asterisked fool."

She shivered. "Swear some more," entreated Bob the Bullet eagerly. "It's fearfully vulgar but absorbingly interesting."

But her guide only laughed again, and bidding her be quick about getting her duds together, he turned aside to busy himself collecting some stones, the use of which she could not guess.

It took her some little time to retrace her steps to where she first changed out of the garb of civilization, and to find her discarded clothes and bonnet. Her heart bled for the poor things, when finally she came upon them lying out helpless and humbled on the grass. If it had not been for the fact that a Bob the Bullet could not possibly wear girl's things, she might then and there have changed again, out of sheer pity and affection. But as it was, she folded them all neatly, laid the pathetic bonnet and precious silk stockings on top, wrapped the wrecked shawl around the whole, and fastened the bundle as best she could with a stay lace.

Returning, she found great doings afoot. In a little square of stones, a fire was glowing redly, while on a flat rock close at hand was set out a bottle and some bread and cheese. On the coals was a battered frying pan, in which some bacon and the two fat trout were hissing.

"Well, where did you get all this?"

He looked at her impishly. "Magic," he answered. "No, really."

"What's the odds, as long's the grub's here?"

"But—"

"Tend the fish, while I make a couple of drinking cups," was his reply, and he handed her the cleanly whittled fork with which he was turning the browning trout. "Do you know how?"

"To cook? Certainly. I—it was taught to me, as to all my royal sisters."

"Er—how many of you are there?" inquired Crook-finger gently.

Her eyes were as candid as the sunlight.

"We are Hilda, Gilda, Ingrid, Hedwig, Blanche, Felise, and I myself," she informed him in the most conversational tones. "And my sisters all live in silver rooms with blue velvet hangings, in the palace of the Red King our father. My brothers, the Seven Swans—"

Once more he inclined his head in reverence. "Would you mind telling me the rest later?" he asked. It's *too* interesting. Hilda, Gilda, Ingrid, Hedwig!" he chanted under his breath. "You see after dinner I'll be stronger. By the way," he added, "I ought to tell you that there's plenty of time to eat dinner in comfort. Your pursuers—"

"Ah, I shiver at the word!" she exclaimed.

"They can't possibly reach you while you're with me, for I have made you quite invisible. In those clothes, you know," he told her casually. For which she thanked him gravely and prettily.

He came back with two twists of bark cleverly folded and pinned together with slivers; and if Bob the Bullet was full of praise for his new friend's handicraft, it is certain that the latter more than complimented his junior's cookery. Done to a turn, the trout still sizzling were laid on the rock and given prompt attention. Never was bread so fresh and crusty; never was wine (if one may

mention it) so delicate and spicy. And their dining room was all cool green and shimmering gold, and sweet with the scent of wild grapes. And a vagrant, gay little breeze came visiting.

"Oh, such a good day!" cried Bob the Bullet, flinging himself back on the soft, warm grass. He reached up his slim hands as if to pluck down a bit of the blue, gleaming sky. "Thank you lots, Crookfinger."

"Thank me for nothing. It was my duty as your obedient slave, to—"

She sat up instantly, and turned on him accusing eyes.

"Oh—! Do you mean that you didn't want to—to be nice to me?" the wayfarer demanded distressfully.

"Not want—?" He stopped and shook his head. "I can't seem to say anything right today."

"I was only hoping," she faltered, as her head drooped a bit, "that you were glad to—to take me for a companion in crime, just for a while. Just for today," she amended. "Just for-make-believe," was the way she finally expressed it.

"And I was hoping," returned the youth unsteadily, "that today might last—"

But she sprang up with a laugh as gay as a flower's. Her cheeks were vivid enough. "Let's go and *do* something!" cried Bob the Bullet. "Right away quick."

"What do you usually do afternoons?" he inquired cautiously.

She frowned. "I want to forget all I used to do. If you've nothing more to offer, I shall be compelled, to my regret, to start off by myself."

"Let's strike the highroad," said Crookfinger after a moment's consideration. "There's always something stirring there."

But she shook her head positively. "I left the highroad," she explained, hitching up her bundle of clothes

more comfortably, because the wicked fairy, or her emissaries, are probably seeking me there. Besides," she added candidly. "so far I've no reason to complain of life in the forest. What if you showed me the bones of your late companion bleaching at the foot of the cliff?"

"Eh—?"

"Why, what you told me," she returned, her eyes widened in surprise at his forgetfulness.

He recovered his ground as best he could. "Yes—yes, of course," he stammered hastily. "Bones. I remember. You have a taste for horrors?" he inquired.

She looked up at him gravely. "In all my life," she said, "I've never seen or heard or felt a thing which wasn't chosen for me by loving parents or devoted nurses. Anger, sorrow, enthusiasm, fires, floods, courage"—she checked off the words on her fingers as she repeated them—"murders, rescues, passion and devotion—"

"Steady, steady!" he cautioned. "I can't remember any more, if—"

She gestured helplessly. "All such things," she told him. "I've never met one of them. The—the brass and scarlet and storms and beauties of life. Except in imagination, of course. But that's not much. I haven't the least hope that you understand what I'm talking about," she concluded abruptly, turning away. It was as though she had suddenly fallen very weary.

"Once I knew an idol," offered the youth politely. She looked back at him, at that. "Lived in a temple all gold and incense and—that sort of thing. They'd set him in his shrine, and there he had to stay all day. Fearfully dull life, just being worshipped," Crookfinger observed judicially. "Idol used to slip away when nobody was looking, and change himself into a—"

"Not really!"

"Oh, yes. Fact." He nodded soberly, then his face

lit up with one of his rare smiles. "Vexatious for the temple guardians. I mean—you're not the only one of your kind," he added groping for the words. "I think I *do* understand, if you ask me. I think that everybody likes to—to get out, now and then. Only some are too old, and some are too dull, and some are too lazy."

"Or they're girls," she added, on a tone between pity and disdain.

"But you and I—"

"Exactly!" she agreed, before he had finished. "This is a little out of your line, too, old man. Isn't it? Dash-blank-omit my asterisked eyes, we're face to face with something absolutely new."

"You'll trust me?" he demanded heavily.

She did not hesitate a second. "It's against every rule for me to do anything of the kind," she answered with enthusiasm. "So of course I trust you absolutely."

"You may, you know," he answered carelessly. "Come on then, you criminal."

"Nice of you!" said Bob the Bullet, dimpling with gratitude.

Slowly they followed along the banks of the little stream. She had plenty of time to study the companion with whom kind providence, or white magic, or good luck, had blessed her. Almost at once she decided that he was good to look at. There was a contrast between the delicacy of his features and his bronzed, hardy, outdoor air, which intrigued and attracted. His hands, she thought, were not originally intended for anything resembling rough work, but now were scarred and tough. His voice and intonation were undeniably those of a man of breeding, despite the fluent profanity and thieves' jargon in which he apparently rejoiced to express himself. She could not even guess his age for though his

figure and bearing were those of somebody not much older than herself, his manner was that of a man grown and seasoned in authority.

"Do you know anybody in this part of the world?" asked Crookfinger suddenly. He was walking a couple of paces in front of her; she was remarking at the time to herself that his ears were small and set closely to his head. So she promptly blushed and gasped a bit before she could answer. Also the abruptness of his question surprised her, for it had nothing to do with what they had been talking about a moment before.

"I beg your pardon?" stammered Bob the Bullet.

Crookfinger halted, and waited for her to come up with him. "I was wondering," he repeated, "whether you knew anybody hereabouts."

She shook her head.

"Where was the wicked witch going to put you in prison forever?"

She considered. "In the castle of my equally wicked uncle," said Bob the Bullet.

"Who is named?"

"Tristram." The answer popped out sooner than was meant; but by ill luck she could not think, for the moment, of any other name.

"*That* man?" cried the leader, with doubt and dread in his face.

"Do you know him?"

"Who doesn't know that dreadful person?" Just for a second his dark eyes rested on her searchingly. "Compared to Villa Mirador, my youthful friend, old Bluebeard's castle was a pleasure palace. So that was where they were taking you!"

"I didn't say I was being taken anywhere. I said that I escaped—from another prison."

"Yes. Exactly. You've walked a long way then?"

"When I met you, I had trodden many weary miles, good Crookfinger."

"It's fortunate we did meet," he answered gravely, "for Tristram's abode is less than a league from this very place."

"You terrify me."

"You scared? Nonsense!" And he slapped her vigorously on the back. "Anyhow you're perfectly safe now, matey."

"You *will* protect me?" murmured Bob the Bullet.

"Sure, if you need it." He seemed to desire nothing so much as then and there to meet a ravening lion. "And I'll see you get to grub and a roof before nightfall, if you hang on to me."

"There must be adventures, too," she insisted.

"Of course."

"What would you say," she suggested gently, "to robbing somebody pretty soon. Do you know how?"

"Well," replied Crookfinger thoughtfully, "I'm always wanting more money than I have; and the only way I've been taught to get money, is to take it away from somebody else. Wait a second, till I think."

So saying, he halted, and with puckered brow conned over certain possibilities. Bob waited patiently. She had discovered that the velveteens had pockets; and it was thrilling to thrust one's hands deep into them, and stand with feet apart like a boy.

"Are you game for a scramble?" asked Crookfinger presently. "If we strike through the woods for a while —at first, we'll fool your pursuers pretty easily. Have they bloodhounds?"

"Yes," she assured him positively. "Big ones. With bloodshot eyes and slavering chops."

"Never mind. We'll fool 'em. And if we have any

luck," he added, "we'll run across the man who in all the asterisked kingdom most needs our attention."

"Ha—!" She gathered her wits. "Who is the blank-dashed scoundrel?" Bob inquired melodiously. "An oppressor of the poor?"

"Worse!"

Again she growled unfamiliar expletives through her teeth. "Tell me more."

"He's not yet thirty, and he's fat," said Crookfinger darkly. "Life with him is nothing but sleeping and eating. And he never forgets his family's reputation for good manners."

"The beast!" she decided.

"Come on then." And with no more delay, Crookfinger splashed into the brook and waded downstream. "To throw the bloodhounds off our trail," he sent back over his shoulder.

"Good!" She promptly splashed in after him. "This looks to me like the day of days!" sighed the orphan child to herself. "And somehow," she added most irrelevantly, "I know I'm perfectly safe with him."

CHAPTER V

THEY were following a trail round the shoulder of a wooded hill, Crookfinger in the lead, when suddenly that ruffian halted and checked his companion noiselessly.

“Duck!” He slipped into the undergrowth which lined the dim path; he dragged Bob down behind a boulder. “Did you see them?” he rapped out in an anxious whisper.

“No.” She was dizzy with the fellow’s abruptness.
“Who?”

“Quiet,” he ordered, not vouchsafing any explanation.
“They’ll be past in a minute.”

Sure enough. She had barely time to make herself very small indeed, huddled close to Crookfinger and imprisoned there by his arm, before men’s voices were heard along the leafy trail. She felt her leader’s fingers tighten like wire on her slender arm. They tapped a little signal for attention. Turning her head, she saw that he meant her to peer through a peephole he had made in the tall weeds growing beside the rock which was their shelter. Two men in the royal forest livery of green and gray, with hunting knives in their belts, had halted not twenty feet away from their hiding place.

“I tell you, I’ll go no further,” announced the younger of the pair, striking his fist into his open palm. “I don’t believe he’s in the forest at all.”

“He must be somewhere,” returned the other with conviction.

“Why don’t he stay where he belongs, instead of making trouble this way?”

"That's not for you and me to settle," replied the second forester doggedly, a heavy fellow of middle age, who looked more fit for a lodge keeper than a ranger. "We get paid for today's work, don't we?"

"Yes, and we'd be paid stayin' home like Christians. If I'd ha' known that being a royal forester meant trackin' a prince when he goes on strike, I'd ha' stayed where I was in the cavalry. The cavalry lives like gen'lemen. But I don't like this messin' footwork," cried the dissenter fervently. "Why does a prince want to quit his job for to go—"

"I don't say he's done right, for all he's got the right to do as he pleases," the other returned. "He's throwed things out fearful, leavin' his work. I'd be for keepin' him out for good, and there's many good steady folk as think the same. But just because the big people believe we've got to have him back, so's the shop can operate, as they say—"

"Well, where do we find him?"

"I know," replied the senior sagely.

"You're the big liar. There ain't a forester in the service can find the prince once he gets a good start. That's what I believe."

"When you're older, God knows you'll believe more."

Lying close to her companion, Bob became aware that he was chuckling. The instant that the clamor of the foresters' wrangle died away along the trail, he rolled over on his back with a smothered hoot of laughter.

"I think you're exceedingly rude," said Bob the Bullet reprovingly.

"Ho, ho, ho! O Lord!" was Crookfinger's only answer. But she decided to be as patient as possible, and busied herself, until such time as the mad youth should recover, with trying to brush away a stain of red mud and dead leaves from the front of her shirt with her finger-tips.

She was quite unsuccessful. Also her hair was slipping. Also she was uncomfortably hot from the march.

"Those blessed, blessed idiots!" shouted Crookfinger to the treetops.

"I wish you'd *kindly* explain—"

"Excuse me." He sobered himself, sighed, and sat up again. "Did you hear all they said?"

"Of course."

"Looking for their prince!" he murmured. "Wondering where on earth their sovereign can possibly be!"

"Whom do they mean?" she queried.

"Julian, I suppose."

"That doesn't tell me much," she observed, looking away. "You forget that I come from distant lands beyond the sea. And—knowing much of the ways of royalty," she added, lifting her delicate eyebrows, "it appears strange indeed to me that a person of royal lineage—possibly my cousin—should be hunted by his own huntsmen. However," she added, "it's not uninteresting. What's the prince like?"

"Princes are all the same," he answered, beating the ground with a switch.

"Oh!" she protested, taking exception to his tone. "Princes are most useful, my dear sir. Unless there were princes, there couldn't be any fairy stories."

"I'm not so sure about that," demurred Crookfinger. "At any rate, I hear men say that Julian's not a bad sort. I know he gives a lot to the poor, and he doesn't get half a day off on Saturday."

"What does he look like?"

"Just a man."

"Have you ever seen him?" she persisted.

"Now and then," he evaded carelessly.

"Please—!" she commanded with a smile which entreated, and promised wonderful rewards, and chided,

and forgave, and was—oh, everything a girl's smile ought to be always! But he did not look at her. He was very busy sighting along his frayed and crooked switch; and that is why he did not see the upturn of her lovely face to his, or the pleading in her midnight eyes. And because he remained stock silent, she promptly announced her verdict: "How utterly stupid of you!"

"I—I couldn't describe him, truly. I don't think I've ever seen him as he really is."

She stared at him, sitting on her heels, her hands laid along the twin stretches of velveteen.

"Lord, but it's a mad day!" cried Crookfinger, apropos of nothing.

"And the maddest of all," she replied serenely, "was our dodging those silly foresters. Perhaps you'll explain that much to me at least, for it was a very disturbing thing to have to do without warning. If they were only searching for their monarch—"

"Well, I don't care to have anybody in the royal livery light on Crookfinger," he interrupted sharply, striking his hand on the ground. A new quality in his tone made her eye him a bit askance, as if this were a new Crookfinger of whom she had never had even a glimpse.

"Oh!" she murmured more respectfully. "So you really are an object of suspicion? You haven't been merely pretending?"

He nodded darkly. "When you see me dodge, it's because I must. See? If ever you were to tell a soul that you ran across me today, I—I'd slit your little white throat," he concluded with perfect politeness. "Understand?"

"P-perfectly," she sent back, outwardly unperturbed. But she rose immediately. Perhaps unconsciously she drew away from him a little. He jumped to his feet.

"All right!" he cried heartily. "Now let's be on our

way. If you're really keen for a hold-up this afternoon, we'd better be about it. For tomorrow—well, nobody knows nothing about tomorrow. I may be dead—so might you. Or back in jail—eh?" He drew a strange, heavy sigh. "Take your fun when you can get it, I says."

Her heart sank a little. Just for a moment. The fellow as he spoke had somehow become formidable and sinister; he talked too casually, too earnestly, of horrid things. She followed him out of the bushes with a rather forlorn feeling that the best she could do was to obey him in everything; and at the same time she was busy planning how she could possibly escape from him. Strange, what changed colors are over the world, all within five minutes—ask any painter. Escape! But what could she do, alone in these lonely woods? It was not at all sure that a second friendly butterfly would appear to guide her.

They were out on the trail again. "Are you tired at all?" inquired Crookfinger gently, his surliness all vanished.

As always, as on any girl worth her salt, so did his solicitous question act on Bob the Bullet. That he should ask it seemed to imply that he had found her wanting, that he was doubtful of her gameness.

"What a very silly question!" she answered with proper contempt.

"But we have walked a good distance—"

"Nonsense!"

"But you, in those heavy shoes—"

"Perhaps it is you who are tired," she suggested sweetly. "And now, don't let's mention another disagreeable thing—as long as we're together. By way of contrast," she added, falling into step with him again, "you may tell me more about the vanished prince."

"Ask me something I know about."

"Very well." She pondered a moment. "Tell me something about Crookfinger."

"Oh come!" he demurred, with a laugh and a queer glance of sharp inquiry at the little companion tramping along at his side. "A young rooster like you ought to learn something useful. Do you know how to hold a man so's he can't break away?"

"God," she smiled softly, looking straight ahead, "in His infinite wisdom, has granted that knowledge to every girl."

"I'm talking to Bob the Bullet," he made haste to remind her severely. She lowered her head, with a flutter of eyelashes. "My companion in adventure."

"Sir," the person in velveteens replied most humbly, "I shall be glad to receive all necessary additional instructions. Since, you say, we are going to be highwaymen this afternoon, it is only right that I should adopt whatever methods you prefer—however masculine, crude, and clumsy." She halted and looked about her calmly, with an appraising eye. "Here is an open space. Here, unseen by the general public, is your opportunity to teach your partner in crime. If"—and she stretched her slim arms prodigiously, with an air of utter boredom—"you know any tricks that are really new."

"Good!" With no more ado, he rolled up his ragged sleeves and tossed aside his battered, shapeless cap. If she shivered a bit at these warlike preparations, she was bound he should not see it. And promptly she followed his example, then faced the bronzed young ruffian—expectantly. . . .

"Something like this?" inquired the junior member of the firm very gently, after ten minutes of earnest study and practice.

"Yes. Ow—! Here, softly, you young devil!" And with many most wicked words did Crookfinger strive to

wrench himself free from the vise-like hold into which his pupil had locked him securely.

"Does it hurt at all?" the latter inquired compassionately, making the grip still tighter.

"Yes. That is, not so hiatused much. But—"

"I want to make quite sure I've caught your idea. Let me try once more," begged Bob, releasing the captive. "Young sir," replied Crookfinger, with a very crooked bow, briskly rubbing the arm which had been twisted into the small of his back, "I am compelled to decline."

"So sorry!" came the answer. Cool as she tried to appear, as she looked the older villain up and down, there ran over her another shiver of dread. What if after all she had only angered him? Casually, but with shaking fingers, Bob the Bullet picked up a convenient fallen branch half as long as his arm and as thick as his wrist. "Crooky," asked Bob, as one who requests a favor, very politely, "will you please show me how to throw a man? If ever I should be attacked by a villain. Throw him painfully, I mean."

"Sir," the other answered with equal civility. "if you'll be kind enough to attack me here and now, I'll do the throwing, and you can—what's this?" he demanded sharply.

For the other desperado, with white teeth agleam and eyes aflame, had flung himself at his teacher in a rush. "Stop me!" he panted, as he smashed down his heavy bludgeon.

Crookfinger dodged. The blow only grazed him. With a sweep of his arm, he deftly gathered his assailant in, set his forearm against Bob's soft throat, twisted his knee behind the other's, and sharply bent back the lovely, spirited head.

"Now hit me, you brute!" he grinned, pressing steadily

as the slim shape in his arms, for all its plucky struggle, gave in slowly. "Do you get that idea too?"

"You win," came the muffled answer. For a moment longer she hung in his embrace, bent back over his knee. She looked up at him. "That was nice and real, wasn't it?"

"Real enough," agreed the outlaw, freeing her. "If I hadn't dodged, you'd have brained me. What do you want to play so rough for?"

Bob tossed away the club. "There's no use doing anything, if you don't do it hard."

"Just as when one—loves. Eh—?" was Crookfinger's sudden suggestion.

"As to—love," returned Bob the Bullet, in the most matter-of-fact tone imaginable. "I haven't the slightest idea. Or interest. I hope I didn't really hurt you," he added suddenly, clasping very dirty hands.

"Would you—would you like to try that last hold once more?"

The dark eyes were lowered. The rogue turned aside aimlessly, with a shrug. One tried to draw together a rent sleeve, through which showed the white, smooth curve of an arm and shoulder.

"Not now," replied Bob the Bullet. "I think, for a first lesson, I've learned quite enough."

What was it which struck Crookfinger in a queer, quick silence? You could have counted ten before he so much as looked at his late adversary. Then with an air of making a resolution which he swore before all the saints to keep, he held out a roughened paw. "Shake!" he growled. "You little game-cock!"

Around the rough shoulder of the hill they picked their way, thence down a steepish slope thickly grown with fir trees planted years before in quaintly formal

rows by careful foresters. They crossed some rolling meadow-land. The fugitive was cautioned to keep close to the hedge-rows, and to run for it, when it was necessary to break cover.

"But *why* mustn't we be seen?" queried Bob the Bullet, after obeying three times without question. For the moment he had forgotten that he was very busy escaping from his enemies. His back ached from stooping very sadly.

Crookfinger said nothing till they had finished their crawl through some tall grass, and were safely past a byre at the end of a lane. "I don't want to be seen," he growled. "That's why. And you'd better not be seen with me, neither, my laddie."

The lazy sun was sloping down the sky by now. Afar off, a loaded hay-wain creaked toward a farmhouse, where smoke was rising from a kitchen chimney.

"That's Queen's Wood yonder," said the guide, pointing to a purple band of forest not far ahead. "That's where we're going."

"I hope the Wood's not near Villa Mirador, by any chance," said the other ruffian suddenly.

"What?"

"Villa—Mirador," she repeated, taking a ditch in her stride.

"Oh, *that!*" He was contemptuous.

"All the same," she reminded him, "that is where the wicked Tristram lives."

"And he's no friend of yours—eh?"

"Every princess, in every story book, has a wicked uncle or a wicked stepmother. As you know perfectly well."

"But you're not a princess any longer," urged Crookfinger. "You're nothing but a tough little hedge-sparrow."

“Exactly!” She dimpled with pleasure. “Like this—while I’m with you, I’m safe.” She let her smile rest on him; it warmed him like the sun in spring. “I enjoy being a boy.”

He was curious. He had seen that look of dread in her eyes a half hour since. “Just because you—?”

“Ah, for various reasons,” she answered, nodding gravely. “But if ever I had the misfortune to get near Villa Mirador, even in this disguise, and be captured by my wicked uncle—”

“Tell me,” he interrupted abruptly, “is Tristram really your uncle?”

“Yes.”

“The—the one who’s known as a poet?”

“I must even acknowledge the poet. But then, every family has one member who—”

“He’s a good fellow.”

She flamed into protest. “I won’t have you say that! The wretch would change me back from Bob the Bullet into what—I used to be, the instant he caught me.”

“A fairy isn’t so bad, at that,” he mused. “That was what I took you for, when—”

“I won’t be changed back!” the other cried hotly. “That would be as stupid as if you should get changed into the prince those foresters were seeking, instead of always being what you are this minute.”

“What am I, little pal?”

“You began by being a scare. Then you turned into a useful slave. Then—.” She looked away. “I don’t know. A kind of stranger. But you’ve ended by being—”

“Well—?” He listened.

“Just Crookfinger!” She whispered it. It was as though she had told the youth of one of the gifts she had from God. And perhaps that was why the young

rover's look grew gentler and more thoughtful; perhaps that was why he bent himself to the joyous task of weaving, each moment that they walked together, some new enchantment out of the day's brightness. He sang her queer songs from gipsy-land. Bits of quaint lore he taught her about this or that wild creature they encountered—as how the lark first learned to sing—of the hares, with their funny white flags—about the snakes sliding by moonlight (oh, delicious and shivery, that tale was!)—and why the deer can't pray to God. He hinted about his house in the woods, promising darkly to take her thither.

"To—tonight?" she queried after a pause, breathlessly.

"First we've got a job to turn," he evaded. "Got a knife about you?"

"No. Have you?"

"Of course." He drew and handed her nonchalantly the six-inch blade he carried, heavy, perfectly balanced, with nine notches nicked in the staghorn handle. "I've sent this old lady home a time or two."

"Oooh!" she shivered.

"But they were all better off when they were dead," Crookfinger vouchsafed, returning the weapon to its hiding place in the front of his shirt. "And—I never use it unless I have to."

"Er—what do you usually use?"

He laughed. "So far," he answered, "I've had to go through life depending just on these." And he held out in front of him a pair of capable sinewy hands. "They do the work all right, once I lay hold of a thing. I—"

"W-will you use the knife this afternoon?" she hastened to inquire respectfully.

"On—our victim? Oh, I don't think so. Too fat. I'd lose the knife somewhere inside him. No, he's your

meat. I'll just stand by, to help out. Are you still game?"

"Watch me!" returned Bob the Bullet sturdily.

A few minutes later, they entered the shadows of Queen's Wood. For some reason, Crookfinger did not think it necessary to tell his companion that they were now within a quarter of a mile of the place where they first had met, by the brookside.

CHAPTER VI

TURN we from these brawling episodes of knavish life. Too long our stage has lacked a scene wherein our gentler readers might take comfort. But now virtue awaits its turn, and likewise elegance.

Permit us, ladies, to present to you our hero. May we call him that? Enter a good man, Oswald de Soulter, an orphan, immensely rich. Be assured, on our honor, that he possessed not a single vice, save those of good society. Never once, throughout his change from padded childhood to cushioned manhood, did anybody ever tell de Soulter he was a most prodigious ass. A stickler for the seemly—oh, such a safe, safe man as Oswald was! Mothers all approved him. And how the girls did laugh at him behind their fans!

Daily he warmed his heart by considering his possessions (in round numbers); daily, because his brute of a physician ordered it, did Oswald invigorate his frame with exercise—now favoring a stroll about his park, again enlisting in a quite brisk game of croquet on the lawn. At regular hours. And the very many, very costly clothes he wore derived from the Rue Castiglione or from one of London's favorite boot or breeches makers to the nobility and gentry.

Thus, on a day when here and there the world of certain greater and lesser folk was turned quite upside down, Baptiste the perfect servant laid out his master's walking stick and hat of curly beaver at precisely half past four. Thus, two minutes later, down the broad stairs descended Oswald, fawn colored inexpressibles

strapped 'neath varnished boots, locks Olympian, cloak of plum color round his shoulders.

"Ah!" he said, remarking over his stock the preferred hat and cane. "Very good, my fine fellow!"

Baptiste glided to the door, opened it, stepped back with a bow. There was good training in that house. "Your honor has a fine afternoon," he asserted civilly but with conviction. There existed also, in that house, a most pleasant footing between Baptiste, his kind, and their employer, who was considered below-stairs a good old toff on the whole.

"Ah!" agreed the great man affably. "Yes. And I shall return in time for tea." Precious words of promise, delivered, as was right, impressively. "I shall be walking in the woods."

He followed an unvaried path, whenever he took his woodland exercise. He trod this afternoon the identical footprints which, the day before, his varnished boots had left in the trim garden alley, along the lane past the farm buildings, through the stile in the wall, and up the principal road which was prolonged straight through the tract of ancient timber called Queen's Wood, a part of the great de Soultre inheritance. If more than once he paused where a sideroad wandered off, considering whether he should strike into the forest to right or left, he always decided in the negative, for the excellent reason that Oswald was not perfectly sure whither such devious ways might lead him. When one is a very important personage, one must never take unnecessary chances. And so, voting today for the twentieth time against dubious adventures, Oswald paced along with his cape thrown back, his gold-topped walking stick twirled handsomely. He tasted the forest-scented air like a connoisseur; he was pleased to inhale a few draughts of it, graciously. And at every frequent stop

Oswald took pleasure in the thought that all this historic, fairy woodland was his very own, with nobody to molest or to make him the least afraid in its peaceable possession.

"I am indeed most fortunate," gobbled excellent de Soulter, swelling beneath his shirt-frill.

There came to him a sound of crackling underbrush, the rustle of dead leaves under flying footsteps, from a thicket on his right. He could have sworn that he heard a chuckle of laughter.

"Haw!" remarked De Soulter, adjusting the eyeglass which dangled from a broad, black ribbon. "It is probably a deer. But I am told that deer rarely attack a person except when they—er—in certain seasons of the year." And he blushed. "But the laughter? Undoubtedly my fancy. My neighbor Tristram the poet would assert that the laughter proceeded from a fairy. But I, thank God, do not believe in fairies."

And so he continued on his way, happy in the thought that the main road through Queen's Wood was quite the pleasantest half-mile on earth, when abruptly a young fellow of the most sinister appearance broke out of the covert a few yards ahead of him, and halted in the road as if waiting for Oswald to come up. As with instinctive prudence the master of Queen's Wood glanced in the direction of his possible retreat, he saw a second ruffian lounging toward him from the rear, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of green velveteen breeches.

"Aha, my good men!" greeted Oswald graciously, continuing his march with firmness.

"Stow it!" replied the first villain lurching up. "This is him, Bob," he announced to his horrid companion, as De Soulter halted, breathing faster. "We've been awaitin' for you, for we knowed you was goin' to be kind to the poor workingman."

"Let me pass. At once." He shuddered away from the defiling paw which the scoundrel laid heavily on his shoulder.

"It'll cost you somethin' t' pass Bob 'n' me, old 'un. I'm tender-hearted, I be, but Bob here—he's wicked."

"Wh-what do you want of me?"

"Oh, we'll take what we want. You don't have to worry none. Aha! Would you now—?"

For the outraged gentlemen had actually raised his cane to strike. But before he could get his blow home, his arm was caught in a grip of steel. Instantly his frail weapon was twisted away by the second rogue, who, closing in from behind, assailed his ears with a volley of the most blood-curdling curses, in a voice as clear and sweet as any girl's.

"Go for him!" ordered the bigger of the highwaymen. He was grinning.

"H-hands up!" As he piped his command, the second fellow swaggered round in front of Oswald, head low. "Hands up!" he repeated, this time with added assurance, and with a tap of the back of his hand against the well larded ribs. "Get your knife handy, Crooky. Might want it. Now, fatty—!" And with that, cramming down his hat so as to hide all the upper part of his face, leaving nothing to be seen but the curve of the chin and cheek, the rogue set his nimble fingers prying into Oswald's pockets whence dangled a bunch of handsome seals, just below the waistline a bit to the westward.

"This—this is outrageous!" protested the victim whose tight sleeves made the elevation of his hands an agony.

"Shut up!" Another well directed tap, under the fat chin this time, lent emphasis to the order, as with a sudden twitch the elegant watch was abstracted, and the purse as well, so deftly that the victim saw his treasures

tossed to the elder scoundrel before he was fully aware they had left his pockets.

“This is *too easy!*” voted Bob the Bullet disgustedly. “He didn’t even struggle.” Then he clapped his hands, and danced up and down on the tips of his toes, just like a little girl with a happy idea. “Let’s make him run a bit—eh?” he proposed gleefully, and dancing up to the hapless Oswald, he pinched that excellent man soundly. “Off!” shouted Bob the Bullet. “Run, chops! Pinch him, Crooky. Look out, Behemoth, or I’ll bite you.” And darting on the roaring, pleading victim, he nipped him here and there cruelly with his tough little fingers. “Gallop, you son of Satan!”

“Run!” echoed Crookfinger, doubled with laughter.

“And take your jewellry!” was Bob’s amazing addition, forcing the purse and the watch back into Oswald’s hands as suddenly as he had taken them. “Off you go, Turk and atheist!”

With that, aided now by Crookfinger who pinched with a diabolical skill a dozen of the tenderest spots of De Soultre’s ample frame, Bob so hustled and tumbled the good man that after two or three hopeless efforts to stand them off, with loosened stock, with his hat knocked off and cloak torn from its silver clasp, the master of Queen’s Wood took fairly to his heels. Pursued, harried by two dancing, laughing demons, he legged it up the road at a speed incredible. He stumbled and sprawled. The inexpressibles split horribly. His tormentors heaved him to his feet again; they drowned his pleadings with cries of ribald joy. He tottered a few steps further; and again he would have fallen, unless at a word from Crookfinger, the two villains had not hoisted him up a second time and set him on a bank by the side of the road.

“If you hadn’t looked so silly,” quoth affably Bob the

Bullet, "nothing at all would have happened to you. Come on, Crooky. I'm tired of this game. Lead me," he ordered with a gesture, "to something more exciting." And into the depths of the forest did the villains disappear as suddenly as they had emerged to shatter the peace and quicken the pulse of Queen's Wood's master.

And if we follow the pair as they threaded their scoundrel ways through the trees, it is with every wish to abide with honest, breathless, brave De Soulter. For God knows the latter needed company and comfort, in the crisis, of all good people. An hour passed before he was able to drag back his own ruins to the great house whence he had sallied forth so gallantly.

"What on earth made you give him back his watch and money?" inquired Crookfinger, when the outlaws had put a proper distance between their wicked selves and the scene of their crime.

"Ah, he looked so pathetic," sighed Bob. "Didn't you think so? Like a rabbit."

"Hrrrmph!"

"Crooky, you're not vexed with me?" The dark eyes brimmed with a startled surprise. "We couldn't possibly *truly* take his things."

"It's been done before to the like of him."

"Yes—yes. But we didn't mean to rob him in earnest. Did we?" Bob added anxiously, as his companion vouchsafed no reply. He halted half over a fallen log. "Look here," offered Bob, "if you wish to, we'll go back and—and finish him."

"I was only thinking," said the chief villain, lending a helping hand as he spoke, "that an hour ago you said there was no use doing anything, if you don't do it hard."

"But we were only making believe with Oswald." She

dimpled with laughter. "Oswald! I'm sure he thought we did things hard enough."

"You did your part all right."

"I was scared," confessed the newcomer in crime.

"You? My eye! You're not afraid of anything."

She leaned toward him. "Do you really believe that, Crookfinger?"

The bandit halted and faced her. She raised her eyes, then quickly lowered them, for as the man looked at her the sunny laughter vanished from his face.

"I believe," he said, so softly one would never dream his gutter talk could profane the very air, on occasions, "I believe you're the finest boy that ever was born. And the most glorious girl that ever happened. And I can't tell for the life of me which I love the most, Bob the Bullet or—what is your other name, the long one?"

"It's Bob, for today, Crooky."

"I'm talking about tomorrow."

She looked straight into his glowing eyes. Her lovely face, like his, was very sober. It was very sweet and tender, too—it had pity in it. Her hands clasped against her breast, then fell to her sides, as slowly she shook her head, still looking straight up at him.

"There isn't going to be a tomorrow." She spoke just above a whisper, very slowly, her voice level and cool. "Crooky dear!" she added suddenly. Her face had flamed to scarlet, as she sprang away from him lightly as an elf. "No!" cried Bob, with a shake of his curly head. "But today isn't finished yet, old lad."

"The day of days!" he cried unsteadily. Still he watched her. He was as one bemused. Tattered and weary, grimy with travel, still clinging to her bundle of clothes, she was ever so dear, and as complete as color and curves can make any girl. "I'll never forget it!" swore Crookfinger the outlaw reverently.

"I'm afraid," offered Bob contritely, "that I've terribly interfered with your—your work today."

"You have," he answered promptly. What dreams of loftier days, what plans for bettering lonely lives like his own, had the youth not owned since the dawn of this strange, strange day? "But I feel guilty too," he went on, in a kind of drawing-room manner which baffled and puzzled his companion sorely. "I'm well aware," said Crookfinger, "that little ladies like yourself should spend their days in better company."

"As to that"—and she ducked him a little bow—"permit the ladies, good sir, to judge. And now let's be moving. Shall we go? For even I, who am totally unused to living close to nature, can see that there's very little daylight left us."

"More adventures?" he queried.

She considered. "This morning," she answered finally, "there was nothing I wanted so much as—doing something, going somewhere, being somebody different, escaping from—from myself. Now," said Bob the Bullet earnestly, "such is the nature of woman—of man, that is to say, what I want more than anything on earth is a chance and a place to sit down. Lie down. Stretch out. I also desire a large, coarse meal. Other lost damsels have lived quite happily on roots, herbs, and berries. See any story. But this particular sprig of romance," she sighed, "can't qualify as anything so refined."

"All right. Come on then, youngster." He had somehow the air of one who takes a resolution. "We'll see if we can't rustle a snack somewhere."

She was more tired than she cared to acknowledge. A heavy shoe was rubbing her heel; her breast and shoulder smarted painfully from the lash of a twig which Crooky held aside as he led the way, but let fly back too soon; her bundle had the weight of six, and the stay-

lace which bound it kept slipping most vexatiously. The laughter had faded from the day with the sunlight. One was quite content to plod along in silence, close to one's tireless guide; it was best to pay no attention to the queer twilight noises which stole out most disconcertingly from darkening glade or whispering copse.

They took a turn to the right, another to the left, round the corner of a rocky ridge. They struck a wider path, but grown up to grass and young birch saplings; they followed this straight toward the sunset for some distance, and then, with a moment's careful examination to right and left, as if to make sure of his bearings, Crookfinger abruptly turned out of the path and started straight down the wooded hillside.

"Where are we?"

"Queen's Wood. Still," the guide answered shortly. "Most there now, youngster."

"Thank God!" ejaculated Bob the Bullet, employing that pious expression for the first time, and astonished to discover how admirably it expressed what was in his heart. "Does Oswald own this part of the Wood, too?" he added, for the sake of conversation. Good way of making people think you're not tired, to chatter.

"Every rood of land, every stick of timber."

"Oh—" she exclaimed enviously. "I should think he'd want to live here."

"I'm glad he doesn't, then."

"You might meet him?" she hazarded at random.

"A worse thing," said Crookfinger, falling again into his puzzling habit of speaking in riddles, "would be for Oswald to meet me."

"And why is that?" she asked with an air of patient endurance.

"He glanced at her aside. "Sometimes the longing comes—and I spend days and nights in Queen's Wood.

Away from things. By myself. Not that I'm a—a solitary," he added confusedly. "But sometimes—"

She nodded, as if she understood perfectly. Whereas she understood nothing at all. Even the women who know men well are at a loss when their companions hear from afar the strange desert, forest, sea-call which summons a man so imperiously away from women and the like. They can only accept it or resent it; the wise ones among them never attempt to combat it.

"If Oswald knew I came here, he might try to hunt me out. Just because he owns the Wood, you know. Not because he ever enjoys it. He's afraid of it."

"Afraid?" she echoed.

Crookfinger nodded. "Not," he said with a whimsical, teasing smile, "that it matters in the least."

With that he plunged ahead more rapidly than ever. He was twenty yards ahead of Bob, who would have sooner died than confess that her legs were so weary she simply could not keep pace. Then the outlaw drew up, and waved for her to come along.

"Tell me what you see," said Crookfinger, with a nod of his head down the slope of the hill.

Wearily she peered and searched. "Where? I see nothing but trees and things."

"Try again. Wait a second till I point your arm, so you can look along it."

Standing just behind her, he raised her right arm. "Hold it stiff," he cautioned, as he levelled it, his chin on her shoulder. "Now sight along it. Hold steady." And he dropped back a pace watching.

Obeying him, she followed as well as she could in the direction he gave her. She stared. And presently, between the trees, she made out what appeared to be a gigantic boulder settled into the lap of the hillside, at the foot of the rocky cliff which curved away to the left of

where they had halted. Covered thickly with some tangled vine, grown close about with birches, overshadowed by a great oak centuries old, with only a hint showing here and there of its grey sides, the great mass would have been passed by without a second look by anybody. She thought it rather silly, perhaps a rather poor joke on her, that Crookfinger should delay their march, when she was so very tired and hungry, to look so carefully at a big lump of stone.

"Well?" she queried, lowering her stiffening arm.

"What?" he countered. His smile was annoying.

"Boulder."

"Yes?"

"Uninteresting."

"Indeed!" He pursed up his lips as if to whistle. "I wonder if you ever saw a big stone quite like that one, Bob?"

"Dozens. Let's be going. Or, I give you my word, Crooky, I'll have to drop down right where I am."

"When all the comforts of home are not a hundred yards away?"

She sighed patiently. "Tell me the joke, and let's have it over with."

"You—you dear little thing!" he murmured, so contritely, with such a promise of help and comfort in his voice that she forgot to resent the words he used. Also she neglected to be angry when without so much as by-your-leave he slipped a sinewy arm about her, and half carried her down the dim little trail which threaded its way toward the boulder below. For a moment she closed her aching eyes; for a moment she drooped back gratefully against his sheltering arm. "All right!" she heard him murmur. "Now look, little pal."

He had halted her opposite the face of the rock. Languidly she glanced at it. And then Bob uttered a little

cry, for, barely to be perceived through the matted tendrils and leafage of the vines, there showed a black square, extraordinarily like an opened window. And just to the right of it, she made out some vertical strips of weathered, mossy planking like that of a tiny door.

“I—I don’t believe it!” she cried.

“This,” observed Crookfinger contentedly, “is the day when one is not to be surprised at anything. I ought to tell you frankly,” he went on, “that this is not the house where Snow White went to live with the seven dwarfs, nor that other one where the three bears lived. But it *is* the house where a certain damsel turned outlaw is going to have some supper.”

“But, Crooky—!”

“Well?”

“In—in there?” she demurred wearily. Her heart sank. “It must be full of the horridest things. Bats, you know, or—

“Let’s have a look,” he answered, as he pushed open the door. “Come on, Bob.”

“I—I don’t want to.”

But he only laughed over his shoulder, as Bob lingered in the open irresolutely, and disappeared in the darkness within. She looked about her. Was that actually a cipher of intertwined initials carved on the stone lintel, or did she only fancy she saw the quaint design? No. Real. Hardly less amazing was it to hear from the interior of the rock the scratch of a match, and to see the friendly glow of its tiny flame. The interior of the place grew warm with yellow light.

“Devil a bat!” Bob heard the leader chuckle. “Come, take a look, youngster.”

It was with a kind of indifferent recklessness that she peeped in at the open door. One peep, and—”

“Crooky!” breathed Bob ecstatically.

And who wouldn't have been delighted? Even you, sir or madam, who have disapproved of every action and every feeling owned by our Eugenie Louise from the instant she rebelliously left her proper sphere in society some distance back. Fancy! Weary and doubtful, she entered without warning from a damp woodland twilight into a little, bright room with walls of smoothest, pale gray stone. Under the carved hood of the chimney piece was laid a fire; near by stood a table and two chairs beautifully wrought in a fashion of long ago. In a corner sprawled a low, broad couch, heaped up with fragrant sprays of pine, all overspread with softest deerskins. From a shelf gleamed down some pewter ware. And (perhaps the strangest feature of all) there against the bare wall opposite the door, towered a most gigantic clock, if you please, ticking away sonorously, as though its living presence in this forgotten dwelling were the most natural thing in the world. And everywhere reigned perfect order, with the clean scent of lavender.

"I—I don't recall that I have died," sighed Bob the Bullet, "but I'm positive that this is heaven."

"If only you'll feel at home there!" chuckled Crook-finger. "I hadn't dared hope that you'd say that about, about—" He broke off abruptly. "Sit down," he ordered. "Stretch out—be ever so comfortable. And the first thing you know, we'll have a go at supper. But first—steady now—let me help you youngster."

Before she could frame any sort of protest, he relieved her of the sodden, draggled bundle of clothes. He led her across to the piny couch; and then, dropping on his knees before her, he unlaced and pulled off her heavy, achy shoes. He slipped outdoors, and was back in a jiffy with a cool drink of water; in another jiffy the astonishing outlaw had produced from a corner cup-

board a basin and pitcher, a rough towel, and some blessed soap.

“Douse away,” he commanded. “I’m going out to fetch some firewood.”

“Can’t I help you?” she offered. Dare we say that she made the offer very listlessly?

“Yes,” he answered. “You can help a lot by making yourself all rested and cozy and happy. While I’m gone,” he added hastily, as for a second time he disappeared outdoors.

“Can I come in?” she heard him call, some minutes later.

“All right.”

He pushed open the door with his shoulder. A freshened, glowing thing of bright eyes and radiant color smiled at him in the dearest fashion imaginable. All stretched out she was, luxuriously, on the soft, smooth couch, one heel drawn up, both arms behind her head.

“Well—!” exclaimed Crookfinger over his armful of wood with deep appreciation.

But she had whipped to her feet almost before he had taken her in. Almost, that is to say. “Tell me what comes next,” she commanded eagerly, hand on hips, facing him.

“Guess.” He did not move.

“How do I know?” shrugged Bob the Bullet, turning aside.

He followed her with his eyes. A light burned in them, as of a smouldering fire new fanned to life.

“What usually happens,” demanded Crookfinger, rigid in his tracks, only his lips moving, “when—”

“In—in a magic place like this?” sighed Bob the Bullet.

“Yes. Here.”

“Almost anything very nice might happen, Crooky.”

His brows came down; the corners of his mouth tightened. "There's no magic here," he said roughly—and faltered—and went on, his voice pulled sharply down again to soberness, and the fire in his eyes quenched quickly. He began again. "What always happens, I meant, when strayed fair damsels have—have dressed for dinner?"

The velvety eyes sought his. They got a good answer to the question they asked. They hid themselves beneath the long, dark lashes.

"Dinner happens," answered Bob the Bullet, pretty promptly, considering all things.

"Correct!" Crookfinger crossed to the fireplace, and laid down his fagots with a rattling crash. You would have said that a shadow between himself and his woodland companion had suddenly been conjured away. "And the Lord send we always get a dinner in time of need, quoth the beggar."

"May I cook?"

"Gorgeous!" He nodded at her approvingly. "First though, let me get the fire going, and then, young sir—"

"I think it's high time," she observed, dropping into one of the old chairs with a sigh of comfort, "that you told me where I am. I have been fearfully polite. I have been true to my thorough training in the fundamentals of politeness. I haven't asked a question."

"Polite!" the youth echoed, looking up from his task of properly arranging the sticks behind the andirons. "It's vastly better than that."

"Yes?"

"Yes. You've trusted me. All day. You haven't held back, or even looked doubtful, once. And that's why—"

He paused, but she said nothing at all.

"That's why you've been such a brick," he ended warmly.

"But I've been living the time of my life, Crooky."

"Ah, but you couldn't tell, at the beginning. I might have been almost any ruffian."

She studied her pink palms. "You—you didn't appear so very rough," she faltered, "when I first saw you by the side of the brook."

"And—and you haven't been disappointed in me?" he ventured.

"Well, I'm still with you," observed Bob the Bullet, settling back in the chair with what sounded like a most contented sigh.

There followed another capital hour. Such jollity and rapture over the slices of venison, the mushrooms, and the dash of tawny wine which Bob combined with the hand of a master in the old-fashioned long-handled skillet! Such enthusiasm over the compound of cheese and chives and eggs, which was Crookfinger's contribution to their feast! There was a cloth on the table: the pewter ware shone like silver. And the fire was good; and the light in the strange little room was mellow and soft; and life was very sweet all round.

"It *is* magical!" insisted Bob, when, the feast over and the table cleared, Crookfinger lighted his pipe, and the two had settled back. "Whose house is this, Crooky?"

"Not mine," he smiled. "We're in Queen's Wood."

"And so—this house belongs to our late victim. To—Oswald?" she cried delightedly.

"Oswald," he confirmed solemnly. "The gentlemen you treated so very outrageously."

"This house can't be his!" she insisted. "It can't belong to a fat man who gobbles."

"Well, he paid for it. But it's true he never saw it.

As a matter of fact," said Crookfinger, "not five persons in the whole land have been here, for a hundred years. I was able to make it habitable—all by myself—at odd times, without a soul knowing it." He smiled as if at some remembered thoughts which were precious. "I don't know if I mentioned," he added casually, "that this part of the Wood is inhabited by a ghost?"

"Oh—!"

"A very happy little ghost," explained Crookfinger. "But she has been heard laughing once or twice by persons who have wandered here, and they didn't fancy it. So nobody ever comes here any more."

"All of which," said Bob contentedly, "means that you've a story to tell, which you will begin here and now. The tale of this little house," ordered Bob the Bullet of his slave. And he snuggled down deeper into the embrace of the deep old chair.

"I'm not much good at story-telling," Crookfinger answered doubtfully. "It's harder than people fancy. You have to show charm and surprise and make things come true, and make people laugh and cry—and lots of things, to be any good at all. So—"

"I'll be the judge of all that," she assured him. "And story telling isn't a bit hard, if you begin right."

"Tell me how."

"Every story worth while," said Bob the Bullet sagely, "all the fairy tales, I mean, begin with: Once upon a time."

"But this isn't a fairy tale."

"If it's about this house in the woods—"

He nodded.

"Then of course it's a fairy tale. Which is exactly the same as calling it a true story," she added, "when you think about it."

"What—?" he stared at her.

"Exactly," she insisted quaintly. "Only fairy tales and dreams are real, Crooky. And our hopes," she added.

He shook his head despairingly. "Very well, if you say so. Well, then! Once upon a time, there lived a little Queen in this land who—"

"What did she look like?"

"She was about nineteen," said Crookfinger meditatively. "And she had eyes the color of—well, black, you know, only velvety. Not the glittering kind. And her laugh was as sweet as honey and fresh as the wind. And—"

"How pleasant of her!" sighed Bob pleasantly.

"And sometimes," continued his fellow-ruffian, his voice growing more steady (for he had looked away from his audience by now), "she grew a little weary of being just a queen. It happens, you know, in the very best royal families. Sometimes she longed to be—well, more like the girls who brought the baskets of flowers to Saturday market. Like the daughters of the huntsmen or the charcoal burners, who dropped curtesys when the little queen drove past them on an airing, in her coach with six cream-colored horses in scarlet harness."

"With two footmen in laced liveries, standing up behind," contributed Bob to the picture, dreamily.

"Yes. Of course. All very royal. But you see she envied other girls, because there wasn't the slightest objection to their falling in love whenever they wanted to, while she—" And he shook his head.

"Poor thing!" sighed the audience, watching the fire.

"Exactly. But it makes a fearful row, you know, if a little queen falls in love with anybody save a Personage. Somebody carefully selected by her devoted, gray-haired, patriotic, cold-hearted ministers."

"That's true of princes, too," averred Bob the Bullet sagely.

"Er—I dare say. But the little queen," the storyteller continued hastily, not regarding his listener, "our heroine—"

"She fell in love—didn't she?" came the interruption, eagerly, softly.

"Doesn't every girl?"

"Sooner or later," confessed Bob the Bullet with a sigh.

"Ah! Well, one fine day the little queen spied Joris the forester, and lost her heart before you could count ten. Or even six. Like that."

"How perfect of her! He was just the one man, wasn't he?"

"Yes. And so, to make a long story short—"

"But don't make it short!" protested the audience indignantly. "You're leaving out thousands of the most interesting details. For instance, where did the little queen first see her Joris? Where did she speak to him first? Where did she fall in love with him, and he with her?"

"Right where we are this minute."

The two sat looking at the glowing fire. They were motionless, save that beneath a torn, soiled shirt somebody's soft breast rose and fell, quickened. There was a long, long pause, and then—"

"You're making up every single word," declared somebody, very positively.

"No, truly, youngster. And here, in this little glade, where the lovers first met, the little queen caused this lodge to be built, years and years ago. And here—"

"The two lovers lived happily ever after," put in Bob the Bullet murmurously. It was as though she had told in one breath whole chapters of the love-tale to herself,

not waiting for the version her companion might have known.

"You end the tale your own way," said the latter with a smile.

"Like every girl," said Bob the Bullet.

"When I heard," he continued, "that the wistful spirit of little Queen Hildegarde still visited the lodge—that now and again one could hear an echo of her laugh or whisper here, of course I came here too. Whenever I could. To—er—dream, you know," he sent at her vaguely. "To hope. That one day I might see her. That was nearly two years ago."

"And have you?"

The ruffian lowered his eyes. There was a little pause. "Yes," he said at length.

And then there ensued another pause.

"There's one chapter of the tale you haven't told me," murmured the lesser villain presently. "Were the two—lovers ever separated?"

"There came a dawn," responded Crookfinger sombrely as a storm. "when Joris awoke from a dream, from a memory of a queen's soft kisses, to find that she had vanished into the forest. It is said that the fairies of Queen's Wood had taken her. Her own world never saw her again."

"So there wasn't a happy ending, after all!" accused Bob bitterly.

"Oh, as to that! I'm not so sure. The two had lived one perfect day together. And that, the fairies deem, is the most that life can hold. For foresters. Or queens. Or—anybody."

"A single day?"

He nodded vigorously. "They took her away before there was a chance for anything to happen to the two of

them which might have—how shall I say? A quarrel. A misunderstanding. Anything like that."

"But it was cruel, at that," commented Bob. "Perhaps the little queen could never be so happy again."

"Nor Joris, for that matter," answered Crookfinger quickly, smiling a secret to the flickering little flames behind the quaint-wrought andirons. "But it's the law," he added. "Of the forest," he amended, in response to Bob's look of inquiry. "Of Queen's wood, where the Little People live."

"A single day!" mused Bob the Bullet.

"Which now," quoth his companion, looking straight in front of him, "is rapidly changing into night. What d'you say, matey?" he added, with a sudden alteration in his voice to the rough tones of the highwayman he had employed before. "Time to turn in?"

It was Bob's turn to avoid the other's eyes. He hated himself for the warm color which Crookfinger's matter-of-fact question had brought flaming into his cheeks. He fought to steady his voice before he answered.

"High time," Bob agreed with a magnificent yawn. "I'd go to sleep standing up."

"No need of that, you know," said Crookfinger with a nod toward the low couch in the corner. "That's for you."

"But—but I can't take your place, old man. I—"

"That's all right. I've got another."

"Where?"

"Me?" The highwayman turned his shoulder. He crossed the room heavily, and caught up a dark, heavy cloak which lay across a chair. "I'll be all right," he added shortly. "I sleep in the open every chance I get."

"I know, but—"

"And that's all there is to it," Crookfinger insisted.

His companion raised his eyes, then extended his hand. "All right," he agreed. For an instant their hands clasped. It was Crookfinger who withdrew his first. "Thanks, Crooky."

The bandit lingered an instant on the threshold. "There's a bolt to the door," he said, "if you—"

"Not needed," the other answered promptly. "Good night, old man."

"Good night." Against the black of the outer world, his figure, framed in the doorway, made a deeper blur. For a moment longer he stood there, motionless, silent. For a second he seemed sinister in his blackness. Then, with a queer gesture of resolution, Crookfinger disappeared in the velvety night.

CHAPTER VII

So trifling a matter as the driving rainstorm which ushered in the morning after his adventure with the ruffians in Queen's Wood could never deter so good a man as Oswald De Souter from following out a prudent decision. Hardly had he reached home from the massacre, torn, breathless, and battered, than he had planned a course which would assuredly rid the country-side of such villians forever.

"It is the principle of the thing!" he gobbled thunderously to his valet, his doctor, his gamekeeper, the pretty housemaid named Phyllis, his page-boy, and his steward, all of whom had been gathered to assist in the great man's recovery. From his armchair, gowned and cushioned, a patch marring the chaste marble of his cheek, Oswald declaimed hotly against the iniquity of a land wherein a gentlemen could not walk, even in his demesne, without being made subject to the japes and blows of rude fellows like those investing Queen's Wood. The jungle of the Peng-Yang hinterland were safer, for all its naked savages. "No, my dear, no—" he cried to pretty Phyllis, who lingered on some small work of mercy after the others had filed out from his presence. "Thank you—but no. Not even that!" And he smiled awry. "I—I find myself still too agitated. Not that I was hurt, personally, in the encounter. On the contrary, as I think I told you—"

"Yes, your honor," sighed the pretty housemaid resignedly.

"I gave each of the rogues a good, sound drubbing. My own strength surprised me. But—"

"I will take away the candle, so that your honor can get some sleep," offered the practical girl.

"No, no. Leave it. I never retire until eleven o'clock, and I do not choose to let so—so trifling a matter as a murderous assault upset my routine."

At which Phyllis looked down.

"In—in small things," her employer added kindly, touching her cheek with his finger-tip. "Besides, my valet is not at hand, so I couldn't go to bed if I wished. But, as I have said, tomorrow I must make an early start —go to town—and see my friend the Minister."

"La, sir!" from the much impressed Phyllis.

"My old and close friend," amended Oswald, improving his opportunity, in the manner common to all his kind, of bearing down on small folk with all the weight of his importance, "Between the two of us, we'll see that this country's made safe for a gentleman to live in, by gad."

"A very great and good gentleman," voted Phyllis, who was possessed of the very prettiest manners. And she passed from the room, and from Oswald's august presence, with the secret smile which the sighing page-boy hoped would some day reward his highest aspirations.

"Little did the Queen's Wood scoundrels dream in their secret lair that night, that morning would bring them stern retribution. It was indeed outside the experience of Oswald's household that he should be out of bed at six, dressed and at his door by seven, and still resolute, in spite of the heavy rain, to set the machinery of justice in motion. But so it happened. Mounting into his travelling carriage behind a pair of steady grays, he bade the postillion drive him at once to the nearest headquarters of the Royal Rurals; and here he so stirred the brigadier on duty with his glowing tale of assault and robbery that the good man instantly recalled his orders for the day—

which were to the effect that his men should take it for rest, food, and cards—and directed a pair of them to horse at once for patrol duty.

“Would you know the villains again, sir?” he asked of Oswald, as the latter expressed his approval of the brigadier’s alertness.

“Among a thousand. The smaller of the two wretches made an especial impression on me.”

“I trust that your honor bears no marks of it,” returned the officer politely. “Never fear, sir. We’ll have the pair of them before noon.”

“I’ll stop in on my return from town,” said Oswald. “I am going,” he announced pontifically, “to report this outrage to the Minister of Police. Personally.”

The brigadier looked to right and left; he made sure that the postillion could not hear what he was about to say by venturing to lean forward into the carriage. “You will find His Excellency already much disturbed, sir, this morning, I am afraid. Speaking quite confidentially—”

“You may,” allowed Oswald affably. “You may, my good fellow.”

“This matter of the Prince, sir.”

Oswald bestowed on him his blankest stare. “I’m not aware that anything out the common has occurred with respect to His Royal Highness,” he returned crisply. It was necessary to teach the policeman his place. “I should have known of it at once, of course. I shall pay my respects at the Palace at eleven precisely. As always.”

The man looked strange enough. “You—you expect to see the Prince today, sir?” he blurted out. “Then what did they mean by telling us that he—?”

“It is best, my good man,” admonished Oswald, “to avoid inquiring into the concerns of your betters.” And

with that excellent advice, rapping on the glass as a signal to the postillion to be off, he sank back on the cushions ready to face the hardships of the journey. "Remember, I expect you to have these villains under lock and key by noon at the latest."

"If he puts it that way," the brigadier sighed, returning to the shelter of the barracks, "there's nothing to do but to catch 'em. The Royal Rurals," he added warmly, "always get their man. By appealing to my stout fellows' sense of honor, I feel sure they'll saddle up in spite of even the rain. But it's odd, what he said about the Prince." And all the morning, after despatching two of his best men on the quest, the brigadier gave himself up to musing over his pipe, as became a man of action.

And there let us leave him, while we talk of higher, nobler things. Not that we are committed to following Oswald on his trip to town, you understand. On the contrary, it may be well to turn back to the little, hidden lodge in Queen's Wood.

How long he slept, Bob the Bullet had no means of knowing. He could not guess what it was that stirred him from the company of the happy dreams which hovered round his nest of fragrant pine and comforting furs. The little house was absolutely quiet, save for the steady tock-tock of the great clock standing against the wall; the world outside was tremulously still in the moonlight which colored the forest with silver and sable. A fresh, earthy scent of wild-wood, delicate like the breath of columbines, filled each corner of the house deliciously.

For a moment, considering how excellent was this world into which he had adventured, the bandit lay at ease. He clasped his hands behind his head; he stretched luxuriously; he settled with a sigh a little deeper into his spicy, furry bed. Unseeing, his great eyes watched the pale moonlight for a moment, searching the shadows be-

tween the beams of the ceiling. Heedless, yet he listened; serene, he closed his eyes again.

But another instant brought him broad awake. It was as though some unknown voice—not a terrifying voice but sweet and true, like the voice of a friend—had whispered, summoned, given an order. “No more sleep!” it whispered. “Listen!”

He sat up and harkened. The voice was stilled now. I cannot tell you what it was that roused the sleeper. Who am I that I should explain all that happens in a wood where many enchantments may be found?

“It’s the new day calling!” decided Bob the Bullet wonderingly, as his fast beating heart grew quieter. “Another day with—” But he checked his thought with a gasp. In the dim light, there passed before him a score of pictures of what a second day in the forest was like to bring. And if the outlines were here and there a bit uncertain, yet the color of the visions dazzled. He saw himself with Crookfinger in the warm flush of basking noon, and again in the violet twilight; and suddenly he seemed to see the little queen of days gone by all rose and white and palest gold. She was with her forest lad, in hunter’s green. Strange, but seen in the moonlight, the eyes of Joris were those of her own companion! Strange, but the laugh he shared with his little lady did warm like Crookfinger’s laugh, like wine and sunshine! And Bob the Bullet, considering all the world, did cover his face with two small hands, his elbows on his knees.

“No!” he voted, springing to his feet. “Not because I’m in the least afraid,” asserted Eugenie Louise Buchanan positively, as she caught up her sorry bundle of clothes. She made toward the open door breathlessly, a-tiptoe, and stopped. “It was *so* perfect!” sighed the girl, looking back at the tiny happy nest. “But—another day? Everything might be different. Everything *would*

be different," she said with another sigh which turned to a shiver, as she saw again one or two of the wonder-pictures in the moonlit darkness. "I think," she whispered, "coward and wretch that I am, that I'm very much afraid of everything, after all."

In the low doorway, she peeped outside cautiously. Could she get away without his knowing? For there must not be a parting—a good bye—regrets—a scene, in short. He might insist on her staying for breakfast; he would be anxious, hurt, dismayed. He might also—worse luck!—give a hint that he too was willing to separate forever.

Outside, she could for the moment distinguish nothing. The forest shut out the world like a wall. He had said that he would sleep there, somewhere. Suppose he were awake by now and watching her from the shadows? Again she peered about anxiously. To the right extended the gray, vine-clad wall. On the left? There, close against the house, so near the door that she could almost touch it, a form was stretched on the soft, warm grass, wrapped in what appeared to be a heavy cloak. He lay on his back; his head, a trifle turned to the right, was pillow'd on a little truss of straw and his right arm. She saw his face, calm and pale in the strange light of this hour before the dawn. The waxen whiteness of the face, the set lines of the lad's handsome mouth and high, straight nose, as he slept, vaguely terrified her. So death must look, she thought, who had never seen that commonest of happenings. "How silly in me even to think of such a horror—for him!" she scolded, as again the warm life flowed round her heart. Did the lad stir in his sleep ever so little? Did his eyes half open, hidden beneath his lashes, when his senses told him she was nigh? I have never heard the truth of this, for which of the twain would ever have told it? "He is asleep!" declared

Eugenie Louise most positively, as she watched him. She drew herself together, holding her bundle, and was about to steal away, when with a smile she hesitated. He had been very dear and good; he was perfect (she believed) to look upon; she was never going to see Crookfinger again; and because he was most surely asleep he would never guess what had befallen him. Also did her heart entreat her. And so lightly that not even the grass beneath felt the print of her foot, she stooped to the sleeping ruffian; she leaned forward, and swiftly brushed his cheek with the warmest lips the country round.

“Good bye,” she whispered, “best of vagabonds.” And she was gone again, like the breath of the breeze, before the vagabond could possibly awake from the dream which I think must have crossed his brain as he lay there in the darkness. Swiftly she mounted the little path winding up from the little queen’s house to the top of the wooded hill. She had no plans; she merely wished to get clean away. Not till she won the summit and came to open farm land, not far from the place where she and her companion had entered Queen’s Wood the evening before, did the fugitive halt to consider what her course should be.

But this was decided for her, and very promptly.

A pale, dim dawn was now showing; but through a veil of low hanging, sullen clouds which had collected within the hour to make mischief in the world of wayfarers. The air was motionless and cool. And hardly had yesterday’s Bob the Bullet—today’s young heiress—come to the edge of the first field beyond the edge of the Wood, and scrambled across the broad boundary ditch, before he felt in his face some drops of rain. Two minutes later, the whole countryside was weeping in a fine, steady drizzle; two minutes more, and the runaway’s

shirt was clinging to his shoulders most unpleasantly, while the beloved velveteens were miry to the knees. Under the lee of a hedge, where Somebody crouched to bind the hair close beneath the battered hat, Somebody was suddenly made aware that breakfast is of very great importance, felt absurdly small and very, very wretched. Back yonder, beyond the misty woods and down the dim path, waited happiness and good cheer. But—

“Never!” she cried resolutely. A panicky fear took hold of her lest Crookfinger follow her and find her. Again she rose, and quite at random, struck across the fields, hopeful that somehow she would be guided to fresh adventures by—by whoever it is, up in the skies or dwelling in the woods, that takes charge of damsels errant. But she was vividly aware that her shoes hurt abominably, that, to be honest, Somebody was cold and wet and hungry. “Let us be practical!” quoth Bob the Bullet, newly returned for the purposes of this excursion.

A line of leaning poplars, stark and tall in the wet weather, told the runaway that the King’s highroad stretched across the path; and Bob made for it, weary of furtive travel across ploughlands and wet meadows. Once on the *pavé*, he turned east, and hurried along, small and forlorn, through the slanting rain against the wind.

Head down, stumbling through wide, clayey puddles, Bob pushed forward until, at the top of a long rise, a man on horseback emerged out of the mist and rain like an apparition. It needed only a glance to tell who he was. The fugitive had encountered no less formidable a personage than one of the Royal Rurals, in cocked hat, blue uniform, spurred boots, and covered with a great cape against the weather. He reined up sharply, just as Bob came abreast of him.

“Halt!”

The fugitive, too astonished to run, stood fast in the muddy road, and tried to look unconcerned under the searching, kindly gaze of the man on the tall black horse.

"Who are you—out in this weather?" the gendarme inquired. He had reached down and taken Bob's ear betwixt his big thumb and finger. "Where do you come from?"

"May I inquire," fluted Bob the Bullet melodiously, "by what right you expect an honest lad to answer the questions of every dash-hiatused-asterisked horseman one happens to meet on the road?"

"The manner in which you swear," replied the gendarme politely, "tells me at once that you had a good mother. And that she may know you've been in good company this morning," he added, tweaking the pink ear he clung to, "you may tell her you talked with a trooper of the Royal Rural Constabulary. As you may see." And he showed on his cuff the white crossed batons and crown, insignia of his faithful and competent corps. "I've been searching," he said most genially, "for the young scoundrel who held up a fat gentleman, God bless him, yesterday. And you are the villain. If not," said the gendarme comfortably, "at least I shall bring in somebody. And that, as you know, is what police are paid for. If you didn't attack the Master of Queen's Wood, you've certainly committed many another crime, any of which can easily be fastened upon you. If not, I will invent something suitable for your tender years and pretty ways, while on the march homeward. And so—forward, my lad."

"You—you're taking me to prison?" quavered Bob the Bullet.

"To headquarters, for examination," corrected the gendarme.

"Is it dry there?"

"Reasonably."

"You do not need to bind me," answered the wanderer with an ecstatic sigh. "Lead me to a place where it doesn't rain, and I'll follow you for miles."

But the trooper was busy completing an arrangement of the picketing rope which was coiled at his saddlebow. He made a loop, which was deftly knotted about Bob's body under the arms; the free end of the rope was twisted round the gendarme's sturdy wrist. "I take no chances," was his answer, as he wheeled his horse about. "Step out now," he cautioned, "and don't try to get away." He smacked his hand down on his thigh. "Blessed St. Hieronymus, but I almost forgot my preliminary questioning of the prisoner, as prescribed in regulations. That package under your arm," he demanded sternly of his victim. "What's in it, shrimp?"

"Clothes," said the prisoner briefly. "Proceed, trooper, for this rain is exceedingly wet and chilly."

"What clothes? Whose clothes?"

"My clothes," asserted Bob the Bullet crossly.

But the other pointed again and accusingly. From the folds of the wretched packet there had escaped an end of pale pink ribbon, an end of ostrich feather, and something edged with delicate lace. "Yours, you say?" repeated the trooper, his head on one side. And he whistled. His eyes travelled from the bundle to its owner, and he pursed his lips.

The captive edged away to the extremity of his leash; he held his bundle closely pressed against his breast; he surveyed his accuser with a smouldering defiance and scorn in his eloquent eyes.

"My girl's" he corrected stiffly.

"So I hear you say," returned the gendarme. "Well, we'll get the whole story, please God, when the brigadier examines you. March now." He started his horse; for

a moment he fell into profound meditation; he looked once more at his captive trudging sturdily along through the puddles. "Er—you must be sure to tell me if the rope's too tight," said the gendarme most politely.

"That doesn't trouble me," was the other's surprising reply. "There's only one feature of this affair which appears in the least disconcerting. In prospect."

"And that," said the trooper, "is—?"

"The brigadier's examination." Bob the Bullet answered dolefully. And not another word did he say, nor did the trooper address a word to his little prisoner, until an unexpected apparition at a turn of the road brought them both to a stand with an exclamation.

"Well, think of that!" cried the trooper.

"The poor, poor man!" his captive added charitably. "He's wetter than even I am."

It was indeed a miserable figure which slipped and splashed along the road ahead of them, glistening with rain, his hat like a soggy mushroom, squelching in his boots, his face dark and set with rage. In his present guise not even his own mother would have recognized the exquisite, the perfect, the accomplished Blaise, beloved of many ladies.

At sight of the gendarme on his big horse, the wretched man halted, and held up his hand as a signal that the representative of the law should do likewise. But the latter paid no heed until, as he was passing, Blaise cried out to him in accents wherein rage and fatigue were mingled with entreaty, and all submerged in a fluent torrent of fashionable oaths. At sound of the latter, the gendarme reined in his horse, and fetched Bob to a standstill with a jerk.

"Will you repeat that last?" he repeated civilly. "I didn't hear just what you called me."

"An idiot," raved Blaise, spattered to his eyes from the horse's hoofs. "Variety of dried pear! Bird's brains!"

"Sir," returned the gendarme, "I see now that I have been addressed by a gentleman and an artist. A low-class fellow, one of our common blackguards, I would have ridden down. But for a gentleman, not being one myself, I have the deepest affection. What can I do for your service?"

"Everything," said Blaise wearily. "Find me a young person named Eugenie Louise Buchanan."

"A female?" inquired the gendarme suspiciously.

"Of course, fool."

"I should have known, sir, that your honor would be interested in the pursuit and capture of nothing else." He looked away, pondering. He murmured aloud. "Buchanan, Scottish, thistles, fields, hedges, ditches, water, rain," chanted the gendarme and looked with surprise at his sulky captive, who stood at his side with lowered eyes and a lip adorably pouted.

"What litany is that?" cried Blaise.

"Sir, I try to recall where I've heard the name of Eugenie Louise Buchanan. By police methods. Science. But something went wrong, for my chain of associated ideas beginning with the name of your abandoned, or lost, female, leads me only to this vagabond, who is no better than he should be."

"A surly young brute indeed," agreed Blaise. "But in the mean time—"

"In the mean time," spoke up Bob the Bullet, "I'm getting wetter every second. I protest, good gendarme, that you're neglecting your duty—which is to take me without delay to headquarters, where it is dry and warm. You are gossiping with a civilian when on duty. I shall make a report to higher authority."

“Impudence!” cried Blaise.

But the gendarme shook his head. “He’s perfectly right,” he returned in a tone of deep melancholy. “I thank you, vagabond, for your merited rebuke.”

“But Eugenie Louise!” cried Blaise piteously. “I must find her. I’ve been sent out for that purpose. She escaped from her guardian’s care yesterday, on the high-road, only a couple of leagues from here. She is the niece of Tristram De Cordelaer, of Villa Mirador. She—”

“Her age, her height, the shape of her face, her color, married or single, and her distinguishing marks if any,” demanded the gendarme.

“I am told,” said Blais, “that she is the handsomest young lady in the kingdom. And she wore, among—or above—her other garments, a rare and costly Indian shawl, the present of her adoring grandmamma, on the occasion of her seventeenth birthday. To my mind,” said Blaise with conviction, “a most unsuitable adornment for one so young.”

“Right!” agreed Bob the Bullet fervently.

“Eh—?”

“What’s that?”

And four curious eyes were turned on the luckless youth, who now sought to conceal beneath his arm his sodden pack of clothes, which had been wrapped, as the careful reader will recall, in a shawl of intricate pattern and softest Kashmiri weave.

The gendarme twitched at the leash. “You said those clothes belonged to your girl,” he reminded his captive severely. “But dashed if I don’t believe they belong—”

“Who is your girl?” demanded Blaise.

“Sir.” replied Bob, “you can understand me when I reply that I cannot tell my lady’s name, or where she

dwells, or why I happen to be entrusted with a bundle of her intimate belongings, to every sodden, miry stranger I happen to meet on the highroad."

"I think you're a damned suspicious character," said Blaise with decision.

"I am flattered to have received so much as a single moment of your attention," was the vagabond's reply.

"I'd bet a hundred crowns he's got your young lady's clothes this instant," the gendarme remarked to Blaise with decision. "Consider that shawl; behold that feathered bonnet."

"I think it most unlikely," Blaise replied, eyeing the dingy bundle with supreme disgust. "But if you wish to bet—what odds would you offer?"

"Shall we say ten to one?"

"You are confident."

"Yes. The Royal Rurals—"

"Done with you. It's a mad bet," cried Blaise, "but this is a mad day."

The gendarme smiled down at Blaise from his horse. "Sir," he replied with the famous good manners of his illustrious corps, "it will be a pleasure to lose the wager, if your search for your lost young lady is thereby aided. Who shall be the judge?"

"I have it," Blaise replied after an instant's thought. "At Villa Mirador there is a certain Miss Brick, who is, or was, the guardian of the young lady in question. She will decide as to the identity of those rags, and—"

"But—but you've promised to take me to prison," objected Bob the Bullet impatiently. "It's not fair to—"

"Villa Mirador is just on our way," explained the gendarme patiently. "Will you come too, sir?"

"Ah, I'm out for all day," returned Blaise discon-

solately. "I've got to find the young lady herself, you understand."

"Should you lose your wager," the trooper concluded, "be good enough to send the money—ten crowns—to the Royal Rural barracks. For Trooper Tylendonck."

"Tylendonck—trooper—imbecile—royalty—crown," said Blaise. "Yes."

"I deeply appreciate," said the gendarme, "your application of police methods." And with a flourishing salute, a twirl of his mustache, and a touch of the spur to his good horse Jet, he went his way handsomely, Bob the Bullet trotting alongside.

CHAPTER VIII

FOR a little while they jogged along in silence. The gendarme could not see, for Bob kept his hat pulled well down, that his prisoner's face had gone white and pinched, that the great dark eyes had dimmed a bit. Nor could the proud policeman, high on his good stout horse, be reasonably expected to know that a fellow's knees get very shaky, after stepping along for more than a league abreast of a heavy charger. But a certain fellow felt extremely wretched, as a matter of fact, about this time of the morning; and that is why he suddenly burst out into a peal of laughter under the shadow of his shocking hat.

"Pardon me," quoth the gendarme, glancing down, "but I am compelled to remind you that levity, on the part of a prisoner, is really not being done this season."

"Thank you," returned Bob.

"I felt sure," said his captor, "that you'd take the suggestion in the spirit in which I made it. It is hardly to be expected that even so experienced a criminal as yourself can keep up with every whim of fashion."

"What is the latest?" asked the prisoner, straightening his back.

"An air of resignation," the other informed him, with authority. "Submission"—and he twirled his mustache—"to the majesty of the law." And as if to give point to his pronouncement, he twitched Bob back into place at the end of the knotted leash. "What have you got to laugh about, anyhow, villain?"

"I was laughing," said Bob, looking up with dancing

mischief in his face, "at the damned funny ending this tale is going to have. Lead on, O Parthenon," he added, grinning at good Tylendonck. "Not that I have an idea of what that means, but you look it. Lead me to my fate. The end's in sight for all of us."

They had come in fact to a long stretch of melancholy wall which enclosed what appeared to be a heavily wooded park. Following along this boundary for a couple of minutes more, they reached a massive yet delicate wrought iron grill with stone seats on either side. The gate posts were topped with heraldic griffins supporting old escutcheons. A driveway, white and carefully raked, curved away through the gates into the depths of the plantation; the heavy and ancient growth of trees in the park quite hid from view any house toward which the well kept roadway must probably lead.

"Right wheel!" commanded the gendarme.

His prisoner looked up in surprise. "Headquarters?" he asked, with a superb affection of indifference.

"The ancestral dwelling of a poet," the horseman corrected austerely. "Villa Mirador," he continued, before Bob could offer the obvious objection that poets never live anywhere but in cottages or garrets. "The home," he concluded "of Tristram De Cordelaer." And they paraded through the open gates.

"The wicked duke," said Bob. He shrugged his shoulders; he had the assurance to look about him critically as slowly they passed through the beauties of the lovely, old park.

"The—what?"

"The wicked duke," repeated the prisoner. "He is expecting me," he added with a finely casual air. He cocked his awful hat more jauntily. "See that I am properly announced."

And this, you will agree, was really more than even a model constable could endure.

"I intend to do just two things with you, my lad," said Tylendonck firmly. "And no more. I shall lock you in a closet for safe-keeping, while the master of the house is looking at that bundle of clothes, and—"

"Why trouble him?" asked the rogue in velveteens.

"He must tell us whether the clothes belong to the young lady you probably despoiled and murdered."

"Ah—?"

"Yes. I shall take you out of the closet to show you to the honorable Oswald De Souter, so that he can identify you as the scoundrel who assaulted him yesterday in Queen's Wood. More than that I cannot promise."

"Then—so be it!" cried Bob cheerfully. "If that's the final programme for the day's performance, let's have it!" He snapped his fingers, straightened up, stepped out with a new briskness. "Take things as they come—that's the way. Who knows," he smiled, "but what the day will be filled to the brim with the most extraordinary surprises? And I even dare to hope—"

"What, to escape hanging?" asked Tylendonck.

"No."

"What then?"

"I hope to get dry," the prisoner responded. What further impertinence he was prepared to utter, I do not know. I am glad, for one, that at this moment the constable rode his big horse in at the gate of the lower court, and, halting before a door under the archway, knocked lustily.

The door was flung open almost immediately by a woman. Plump as a partridge, cheerful as the dawn, brisk as a breeze, she was exactly the person to cook precisely the dishes which Tristram most loved. At sight

of Tylendonck sitting high and grand on his horse, she flung up her arms with a cry of pleasure and surprise, invoking several of the lesser known saints. At sight of Bob, so small and draggled at the end of his tether, her hands came down and rested affectionately on the lad's slight shoulders.

"What prize is this, Jan Tylendonck?" cried Cook. "Art not ashamed of thyself, my babe?" she demanded of Bob in the same breath. "Wet as a fish, and hardened in crime, as I know you to be! And did the brute of a constable rope him like a dog indeed? For shame!" And she would straightway have loosed the rope from under the prisoner's arms, had not the constable forbade her sternly.

"All in good time," he counselled. "First, where is your master?"

"Where he is, with all the day's doings, I cannot tell," the cook replied, rolling up expressive eyes. "Ah, Tylendonck, what a day!" she sighed. "Could you take the old woman away at the end of your rope, d'ye think, and lose her somewhere? It is wild she is," said Cook in a tragic whisper.

"Who?"

"The missus. What with lost young ladies, and strange old ladies, and the master doing this-and-that, and her brother gone who only came last night, and—"

"It's about the lost young lady that I must see your master," said Tylendonck, interrupting.

"Then tether your horse, and knock at the great door. I'll send Anthony to let you in."

"But—my prisoner?" considered the constable, rubbing a wet chin betwixt thumb and finger.

"This?" queried Cook.

"I have the honor," said Bob. "I believe I am to be thrust into a closet."

"Exactly," said Tylendonck. "If you'll show me where I can—"

"You're going to leave the rascal with me," announced the Cook in a tone which admitted of no debate. She loosed Bob from his bonds then and there, keeping a firm hold on his limp collar. "Go about your business. I'll see to this jackanapes."

"Will you try to escape, young man?" asked Tylendonck.

Bob looked about him critically. His lip curled. "Is this actually Villa Mirador?" he asked. And when both constable and cook assured him that he had arrived in good truth at the home of the poet, the graceless starving replied with a shrug that he had not fully decided whether to attempt an escape or not. "The place appears banal," he said with an air of supreme boredom. "And yet—"

"'Tis not the place it was, and that's the truth," the cook admitted. "This new woman that's come—she's terrible. So Peggy says. And as for the brother—"

"What—new woman?" was Bob's extraordinary question.

The cook called out to one of her associates, who was dimly perceived on the far side of the kitchen as merely a blue and white figure which sang as it moved about. "Peggy," she cried, "what's the name of the old girl who came yesterday?"

The song ceased. One heard a ripple of laughter. "Brick!" called back the distant Peggy.

At the sound of that name, Bob strove to free himself from the clutch of the heavy hand on his shoulder. His eyes were all agleam with defiance and fear. "Brick!" he cried. "That makes a difference indeed! Yes," he assured the constable with an ugly laugh and a stamp of his foot. "Yes. Bet on it, Majesty. I'm going to

escape from Villa Mirador the first chance I get, and—”

“Stuff and rubbish and listen to him talk!” interrupted the cook. She had the admirable gift, so rare in women, of reaching a decision in a wink. She cleared the air. She waved to the constable to begone. She gathered in Bob. She did everything necessary. “Escape, will he?” gaily mocked this excellent woman. “Ha! Hark to him! And then let *me* say that I’m going to stuff this springald so full of jam, lark pie, ale, and affection, that he’ll no more budge from my kitchen than from the Kingdom of Heaven, if ever he had the luck to get there, which I doubt, the rogue, he being old in sin as he is young in years.”

“All the same,” insisted Bob, “if Brick is here—”

“Hold your tongue, bless your naughty eyes, who wouldn’t love you?” was his answer. “Off, Tylendonck.”

“I am thinking,” returned the policeman, holding up his hand for silence. “As to this matter of my prisoner escaping.” There was a moment’s silence. “If a young man accepts a handsome woman’s kindly hospitality,” he mused aloud, while the others stared, “if this young scoundrel gorges himself on your lark pie and ale—”

“O vision!” burst from Bob before he thought.

“Exactly!” The policeman’s brow cleared, and he smiled. “Out of politeness, he couldn’t possibly leave Villa Mirador at once. After eating—and all the rest—he’s bound to stay a little while, certainly,” explained the representative of the law contentedly. He dismounted. “Take him in charge, Cook. I’ll go find the poet.”

And so matters were arranged. Tylendonck went off with the bundle of clothes, while Bob, released from his bonds, was half led, half pushed, wholly hustled by the cook to a seat by the cheek of the fire. And ah, but life is sometimes good indeed, thought the captive bandit. . . .

Before the blaze he steamed deliciously; his bland refusal to slip off his wet, wet clothes made the ruddy cook and all concerned laugh very cozily; the pretty house-maid teased; there was spread before the rogue a noble array of gorgeous eatables; and the kitchen at Villa Mirador grew so very gay that to forget the troubles of a bandit's life was as easy as eating pie. What a splendid tale of adventures did the wanderer tell his hostess! What fun to hear the cook's exclamations, to watch Peggy's blushes, as perched on the edge of the oaken table, he narrated the brave deeds of Bob the Bullet, rover of field and forest!

"That's the life!" cried the villain sweetly, draining the last drops from a pewter tankard. His head was tipped back; his face was buried in the spicy brew. He could not see that a door had opened quietly; he was not aware that the lady of Villa Mirador, her face like the Day of Judgment, stood on the threshold. The cook and house-maid, huddled together on the settle, giggling happily, were also unconscious of the impending doom.

"You there!" burst from the outraged Alicia, as she took in the shocking scene. She could say no more. The spectacle of effrontery and idleness overwhelmed her. She trembled. She was icy. She—

"What ho, old priceless!" responded the outlaw on the table, with a flourish of his hand in Alicia's direction. "Join us? The beer," quoth Bob with sparkling eyes, "is bully."

"How dare you?" Alicia blazed, taking a step forward.

"Madame," replied the youth, "today I dare anything. I have eaten; I have drunk. The generous heart of the goddess of this place o'erflowed with pity for my draggled state; the beauty of yon lesser divinity would cause a better man than I to linger. I am afraid of nothing on

earth. Which is more than I would have said no longer ago than sunrise. What can I do for your service?"

"Out!" cried Alicia, pointing to the door.

"You do not wish me to remain at Villa Mirador?"

"An outrage that you were even brought to the gates," Alicia cried. "Away with you instantly. You will find that idiot waiting for you."

"Idiot, madame?"

"The Royal Rural."

"I should have known," the runaway murmured.

"I have directed him," said Alicia, "to remove you at once." Again her indignation overflowed. "To think of his coming to Villa Mirador with a cock-and-bull story of having a dangerous prisoner—suspected of assault, of murder, of what-not!"

"What-not I have never committed," said Bob the Bullet. "There are things no gentleman can do." He paused on his way to the door. "May I inquire, madame" he ventured, "if our worthy policeman has taken away a certain bundle of clothes?"

"Indeed he has," replied Alicia. "If one may so term those dreadful, sodden rags."

The villain cocked his handsome head. "You'd never believe those things belonged to a fair young lady, would you, madame?" he inquired most softly.

Alicia shuddered.

"Good!" breathed Bob, moving further toward the door. "It looks," he said to himself, "as if I was going to get clear."

"That imbecile fancied those garments might belong to a female relative of my husband's—actually!" cried Alicia. "Those things!"

"An imbecile indeed, madame!" Bob agreed, taking his battered hat as he backed away.

"I would not even show them to Miss Brick."

"No?"

"The very idea that a young lady of the highest position could ever have worn such shreds was ridiculous. It was insulting. To ask Miss Brick's opinion—"

"Might have been fatal," said Bob the Bullet, whose hand was now on the door-latch. He flourished another bow to Alicia, of which any gentleman might have been proud. As Alicia turned her straight back in disdain, he winged a kiss to pretty Peggy who beamed, and another to the cook, who sighed. The tramp of Tylendonck's horse was heard beneath the archway; the door came open.

"Adieu forever, Villa Mirador!" cried young Bob triumphantly.

Luck had not failed. For a moment, it is true, things had looked dark. It had been only Alicia's scornful refusal to call Brick into conference which saved the day. But all's well that ends well. It was with the air of a conqueror that the runaway closed the door and stepped out under the draughty, rain-swept archway, to yield himself once more to Tylendonck. What adventures were still in store, no one could say. But the day was still young; the sky showed here and there a patch of blue between the tumbling clouds; and anything was better than to spend a life between four tedious, decorous walls. How about Queen's Wood?

"No, not that. Never!" said Bob hastily. "Yesterday was perfect—with Crookfinger. Today shall be perfect, too—with the Royal Rurals. Tomorrow—? But why," asked Bob, "should anybody plan so very, very far ahead?"

With that, bright eyed, ready for anything, keen to be off again, he took a couple of steps towards where the constable, coiled leash in hand, was sitting on his horse.

The man did not see his approaching prisoner. He was deep in conversation with a person standing on his other side—a woman, for as Bob approached, he could see a sagging black skirt, her shoes, and the eight inches of wrinkled white stockings which separated the one from the others. The shoes were of black cloth, with dreadful lacings on the sides. I do not think there was another such a pair of shoes in all the world; and the wearer toed in awfully. The hail which the outlaw had ready to send his captor died in his round white throat, as with starting eyes he studied those frightful shoes.

“And—and you will search carefully, constable?” pleaded quaveringly a shrill, tired old voice.

“Saints!” breathed Bob, shrinking back against the door, with a glance to right and left like that of a cornered fox.

“For I *do* love her so, and I shall die of grief, not hearing from her,” the voice went on, brokenly.

“Bob, you’re a selfish scoundrel,” suddenly proclaimed a certain young bandit to himself.

But Tylendonck was speaking. “You could swear to the young lady, if you saw her?” he asked of Brick, who stood with her lean hands clutching his stirrup leather.

“Anywhere!”

And then the constable did a most surprising thing. He could not possibly have known—could he?—had the door made a noise as it closed?—that his prisoner had come out of the house and was standing just behind him; but suddenly, raising his head, he turned in Bob’s direction, and cried:

“Eugenie Louise Buchanan!”

“Oh, where?” Brick bleated.

“Look!” With a touch of the spur he swung his horse to block the exit from the archway to the drive. For Bob, flattened against the kitchen door, there was no

escape. "I fancy," quoth the trooper, "that I've won my bet."

For a second Brick stood rooted to the flag-stones. Her dim eyes took in a vision of matted hair, a lank, torn shirt, two muddy shoes, a pair of shocking velveteen breeches. She looked again, and she saw two eyes which suddenly had softened very tenderly. She saw two slim white hands which somebody reached out in pity, in surrender, in affection.

"I'm ever so sorry you worried about me," murmured Bob, the bloodstained bandit.

CHAPTER IX

THE gentle and experienced reader who has followed the course of our story thus far with attention—and we thank you for your patience, sir and madame!—must be perfectly aware of what scenes await perusal in the pages following. One anticipates a series of glowing pictures of life at Villa Mirador—Ver Meer canvases, as it were, reduced to prose; or studies of character such as the reactions of Tristram and Alicia to the insinuating charm, the provoking ways, the provocative smile of female youth. One looks for whole pages filled with an account of the doings of the orphan child in her new surroundings—tale of hot rebellion, of tears, submission, unconscious conquest. This sort of thing—

“And we agree—do we not, my sweet?—” anxiously cooed prim Alicia a couple of days after the orphan had been installed, “to draw a veil over that—er—momentary indiscretion?”

They were walking up and down on the terrace. It was at the twilight hour—the hour of tenderness and confidences. Alicia had placed her arm about her young companion’s waist, where it remained affixed giving somehow the impression (to the ribald) that Eugenie Louise was in the embrace of a three foot jointed rule.

“Was it indiscreet?” sighed the new dweller at Villa Mirador. She spoke so softly that her worried aunt could hardly catch her tone. She looked up at the sky. “Ah, but I won a day of freedom, of—”

“My pet!” The thin embrace was drawn tighter, with a jerk, then relaxed altogether. “I am forced to confess, my dear, that you almost annoy me.”

"Oh, no—please not that!" Her distress was very real. "I'm so sorry. You've all been so good to me."

"Then please remember, my love, to forget—as we must—that lamentable lapse." She swallowed twice, as at some tough bolus; she resumed with lifted eyebrows and eyelids fluttering. "Has your uncle inquired as to how or where you—?"

"Spent that fatal night?" the orphan put in with a radiant smile. "Oh, yes indeed, Aunt Alicia," she assured her shuddering hostess cordially. "He spoke of it just after breakfast."

"And you told him—?"

"That an unknown fairy prince gave me shelter in a cottage where Goldilocks might have lived." Her hands clasped behind her, the smile in her shadowy eyes, she might have been reciting a lesson conned perfectly. A kind of enthusiasm came into her clear, young voice. "He was handsome and noble and mysterious and most polite and agreeable, in spite of his odd disguise. And he didn't ask for my hand in marriage, or print a respectful kiss on my finger-tips, or—anything. He just cooked supper. And fairies took me away before sunrise, and—"

"And that is what you related to Uncle Tristram. I see. It was very well thought out, my dear. It was just the sort of tale your dear uncle would enjoy believing."

"It was the truth, too," said the orphan softly.

Oh, unquestionably, my dear. It—it *sounds* so true," approved Alicia vaguely. "But—"

"Yes—?"

The older woman looked straight in front of her. "We have agreed, you remember, to keep *this* version for your Uncle Tristram. If others betray any curiosity—"

"Like your brother?" asked the girl, her face suddenly darkening.

"People in general. One has to think of the impression which your adventure—. There's the future to consider, you know. Any sort of shadow is so—difficult." She was thinking aloud. "I've told Madame de Gerouville, for instance, that you spent that night at a farmhouse. A most motherly woman took care of you. Very kind of her indeed. There was not a man in the place. My brother Blaise was told the same story. I regret the worldly necessity which compelled me to deviate even a little from strict veracity, but—"

"But I don't understand, Aunt Alicia."

A lean hand patted a smooth shoulder. "My sweet, you must have full confidence in those who love you."

"I know you're being good to me all the time," sighed the orphan, "but—"

"We will all be happy together," Alicia asserted warmly and gently, approving the effect of the white peacock which was strutting on the terrace balustrade. "We have nothing but sunshine at Villa Mirador, little one. The outside world, with its uncouthness, its censorious tongues, and other disagreeable features, is very far away from our little girl—now."

"Miles!" agreed Eugenie Louise, with a shake of her dark curls for emphasis.

And so, gentle reader, since we must agree with Alicia that it is prudent and best for any young heiress with a future to forget she ever masqueraded as a bandit in the roughest company, and because she promised her aunt to blot out forever that mad day and night of liberty and Crookfinger, and because she actually tried quite hard to keep her promise, why not move ahead and omit the remainder of this stupid chapter altogether?

It is dull business—this writing or reading about caged skylarks.

CHAPTER X

COME with me this afternoon, three weeks to a day since Bob the Bullet wept to see Alicia and Brick remove and discard his precious, mud-caked velveteens. We shall take post on one of the stone seats which flanked the gates of Villa Mirador. In the warm hush of the late harvest season, the quiet has laid its spell upon us; we feel vaguely benevolent and nicely lazy. And suddenly we are jerked out of our comfortable mood by a sight as unusual as it was stirring.

Down the footpath beside the highway came running an elegant lady. Her blue eyes were aflame, her pale cheeks paler, her lovely clothes (which suggested a garden fête) in some disorder. Panting from her hurried flight, with a sobbing desperate cry, she tugged at the iron bell-pull hanging by the gates. And when Anthony appeared from the porter's lodge, in answer to the brazen clangor, the good fellow was stupefied by the spectacle of a leisurely lady of quality beating her delicate hands against the fast-locked gates, in a frenzy.

“Madame de Gerouville!”

“Open!” she gasped.

But so many ideas rushed over Anthony, and at such a speed, that he could only gape at the distressed beauty, and stand fast. “Madame de Cordelaer will be down directly,” he parroted, in the usual formula for visitors.

The lady shook the heavy grille. “Let me in! I've fled here for refuge, idiot.”

“Yes, madame.” He bowed respectfully. “Madame de Cordelaer has the key of the gates,” he added helpfully. “They've been locked all day.”

"How—stupid!" She wept with rage. "Listen," stammered Madame de Gerouville, with a stamp of her foot, so light in its mouse-colored sandal. "A—a man is following me. If he should catch me—"

"Lor'!" exclaimed the perfect footman, with emotion.

"I shall suffer the most frightful fate a woman knows."

"Here, madame?" He blinked. "Right in front of everybody?" He blushed. "What fate?"

"The worst!" she shuddered. "Boredom."

"Good God!" twittered Anthony. "I'll fetch the key at once. Courage, countess, courage!" And he pottered off in the direction of the house at what was really a very decent speed.

Abandoned, the lady shrank back between the high stone gate-posts. In his haste to overtake her, there was a bare chance that her brutal pursuer might pass without seeing her. But hardly had she disposed herself, flattened against the stones, not daring to breathe, before her enemy charged round the end of the tall park wall. And a dreadful sight he was, for in a white paper frill he carried a huge bouquet of late and purplish garden roses, and he puffed redly from his hurry.

"Bashful beauty!" the villain throatily exclaimed, shaking a white-gloved finger at his victim.

Calmly, with all the dignity and pluck of her ancient race, she faced him, resigned to the worst. "How do you do, Oswald de Soulter?"

"Utterly out of breath," came his answer. "But it's nothing serious," added Oswald reassuringly.

She looked away. "You are—passing?"

"Not yet," the man panted. "Good Gad, I've nearly killed myself, getting this far. What made you run so fast?"

She shivered. "I'd be running still," she replied from her heart, "If these damned gates weren't locked."

He pursed his red mouth compassionately. "You were frightened?"

"I was. I am now," she whispered faintly, watching him between her lowered lids. Wearily, languidly, she leaned back against the grille. The attitude gave full value to the long line of her tender, slender throat. "God have mercy upon me!" moaned the pale countess passionately.

Oswald stamped his foot with decision. He shifted his bouquet to his left hand, the better to clench his fighting right in its tight white glove. "It must have been that vagabond up the road," he declared.

"Who—?" The lady opened her blue eyes wide. She sat up at once. "Oh!" she exclaimed, as her tormentor pointed in the direction from which they both had come running, "you refer to that strange, smiling, gipsy fellow, lying yonder in the shade with his pack beside him? Dark eyes. Slim figure. I didn't even notice him," said the Countess de Gerouville disdainfully.

"All the same, I've a good mind to go back and chastise him," declared the master of Queen's Wood.

"And desert me?" cried the fragile beauty, clasping her hands. It was a gesture she made haste to correct, less Oswald should think it signified despair. "Ah!" she exclaimed warmly and with encouragement. "Yes, do go back. Go—anywhere," she whispered to herself.

But she was doomed to disappointment. As always, she would say herself, who had felt for years that she was a woman much misunderstood, much to be pitied, poor little blonde Marcelle! With a hasty glance along the highway beneath puckered brows, and murmuring something to the effect that he didn't see the vagabond any longer—which was lamentably a lie, good Oswald leered upon his victim, and without waiting her invita-

tion, seated himself on the stone bench at her side, as if it were the most natural thing in the world.

"Good Gad, how fortunate I am!" he exclaimed.

"It's quite true that nobody has murdered you yet, dear man," the lady murmured through her white little teeth. But he did not hear her. He was under full headway; nothing could stop him; she could only pray that her martyrdom might end.

"As I was about to observe," she heard him say, "while on my way to the Brissacs, to offer the lady my congratulations—"

"Your what?"

"Congratulations," he repeated, showing his flowers.

"A woman has six children, and he offers his congratulations on the seventh! You mean your sympathy."

"Er—very likely." He reddened decently. "As a bachelor, I—I can't judge. But at any rate," he resumed with relish, "while on this errand of mercy, so to term it, I spied in the distance a charming figure which could be none other than the Countess de Gerouville. You, madame." He stopped, and turned to face her, his head on one side, pleadingly. "As an old friend of the family's," he suggested amiably, "Mayn't I call you Marcelle?"

"As to that, you should ask my husband," smiled the lady.

"I will, immediately."

"And get killed," she said to herself. "Do, Oswald," begged Marcelle.

"Yes. Thank you. Where was I?"

"When you broke off to think of me—and thank you for the compliment—you had arrived at the gates of Villa Mirador, out of breath," prompted his victim patiently.

"Ah, yes. Exactly." He grasped again the thread

of his discourse with relish for his task. "Here at the gates, as you remind me, I encounter you, and counted myself"—he arose, bowed, and sat down again—"fortunate indeed among mortals."

"Why is that, sir?" inquired the lady.

"Because," he returned impressively, "I find you trying to get to Villa Mirador, home of Tristram the poet and of his devoted wife—"

"I have an engagement with Alicia," explained Marcelle rapidly and firmly. "At the house. Very pressing. You will excuse me?"

"But I've not finished," Oswald complained. "I've said nothing about the poet's new-found niece."

"Well, keep on saying nothing about her," entreated Madame de Gerouville impatiently. "I've heard nothing but Eugenie Louise this-and-that since I came to the country. She becomes tedious—a little, however charming. Which she is. I make no doubt," she ended, on a tone of warm appreciation which she trusted would soften the somewhat acid colors of her first remarks. "A sweet, dear girl."

"I've never seen her."

"Is it possible—?

"And—and I want to see her. Exceedingly. From all I've heard—." He edged a bit closer, most ingratiatingly. Marcelle said nothing at all. "It occurred to me, when I spied you, that you might be willing to—"

Possessing the art of making a vividly expressive face look utterly blank and stupid, Marcelle exercised it now. She might have been listening to Oswald discourse on his travels in the East, or to her husband making love.

"To accompany you to Villa Mirador," concluded Oswald, his vast face shining.

"So *that* is why—?"

"I pursued you? Yes. Precisely. For no other purpose, truly," urged the unfortunate creature at her side, beaming hopefully, protesting his virtuous intentions all at once.

She regarded him curiously, with an air of interested study. And perhaps he did represent something wholly outside her experience, after all. "And he expects me to do him a kindness!" mused the pale beauty, not unkindly after all. "Are you aware," she asked of Oswald, "that Eugenie Louise is a bread-and-butter baby? I venture to remark, my dear fellow, that most men of taste, of experience, your true connoisseur of women in short, would prefer—"

"Oho!" he crowed intelligently. "You mean I ought to fall in love with you."

"Rustic!" She shuddered. Her lip curled. She looked away. "It's happened to others, my good man."

"Oh, no!" he cried quickly with a horrid air of appealing to the best in her. "Nobody could fall in love with you, madame—how could they? You're married."

She sprang to her feet. Her scream of indignation was echoed by Alicia's voice calling an assurance. And in another second that lady appeared, dressed for a walk, with Anthony hurrying ahead to fumble in the lock of the gates with a great iron key.

"Are you safe?" called Alicia anxiously. Her quick eye, seeking the source of her friend's danger, fell on De Souter, and surprise took the place of concern. "Oh, I didn't know that our good neighbor come to your rescue. Have I kept you waiting?"

Marcelle telegraphed rapidly, desperately, in some woman's code or other; but Alicia was oblivious. "So nice and convenient to meet here at the gates for our call on Madame Brissac!" exclaimed Tristram's wife, with warm satisfaction. "Just as we arranged."

"Ah—?" queried Oswald, stupefied. "You said you were going to keep an engagement with Madame de Cordelaer at Villa Mirador," he accused roundly.

"Did I say that?" sighed Marcelle the beautiful. "Then I must have told a lie. Deliriously jolly, life in the country!" she concluded absently. Then she dismissed the whole silly subject with a shrug of her fine, slim shoulders. "Oswald itches to be presented to your niece," she remarked casually. "Shall we be going?"

But Alicia did not move. She only smiled benignly on her pretty, impatient neighbor, warmly on De Souter, gently on the attendant Anthony, who still lingered by the gates with the key.

"You will hand that key to my brother," she directed, "as soon as he comes. I have another in my bag. Nobody is to come in, or go out, this afternoon, without my brother's permission."

"Very right!" exclaimed Oswald. "The countryside is fairly swarming with villains. You have heard of my own recent adventure. And not five minutes ago this fair if perfidious creature was frightened by another rascal lying by the roadside—over yonder."

"Is he still there?" inquired Marcelle negligently.

"Have no fear," Alicia encouraged, at which Marcelle betrayed the most curious little smile in the world. "We shall be quite safe, my dear, with Oswald to protect us."

"Isn't your niece coming?" inquired Madame de Gerouville.

"Not today. Today dear Eugenie Louise remains at home. Sweet child!" breathed Alicia reverently. "This morning, to prepare herself for God, she read diligently in the life of St. Catherine of Sienna; this afternoon, to prepare herself for her husband—"

"Good God!" sighed Oswald.

"She's learning to make a rice pudding."

"Good heavens!" cried the inflammable De Soulter, whose vocabulary of pious cries was lamentably small. "I burn to be presented to such a—a paragon."

Alicia minced. "You flatter, sir. Our little girl must not have her head turned, you know. And now," she added—why did she always give the effect of issuing orders?—"do you two stroll ahead of me. I'm bound to wait one moment for my brother. He was to be here at the gates when we left."

"Don't be long," begged Madame de Gerouville, as she moved away with Oswald, who fumed. "Can't I stop and say how-d'ye-do to Blaise? I want to tell him I'm always at home on Thursdays."

"My pet," returned Alicia blandly, "my brother has come down to the country to—work."

But when Blaise appeared from the direction of the house, a moment later, it must be confessed that his appearance suggested less that of a laboring man than of a baffled conspirator. His look was so dark that Alicia felt a storm impending from the instant she saw him. She made haste to meet him, properly fluttered.

"Dear Blaise!" she cooed. "Whatever would I do without you? I overwhelm you with work; but when a woman is all alone in the world—or practically so—" And she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief.

"Piffle!" was Blaise's brotherly rejoinder. "You know perfectly well you can use me as hard as you like. You've got money, and I haven't. What's up now?"

But she continued to weep resolutely. It was a full minute before she recovered herself sufficiently to moan: "O Blaise, never was a female so plagued as your poor sister!"

"Get on, my dear, get on! This is a busy afternoon." He eyed the key which Anthony had placed in his hand with huge disfavor. "I began as Tristram's secretary.

Now it appears that I'm to be his jailer. Eh—?"

"You put things so coarsely, Blaise." But the hand-kerchief was crammed in the flowered reticule resolutely. "You may think that the public highway isn't a proper place to talk family secrets, but—"

"There's nobody about." He ignored the boyish figure lying under the tree. "What's the row?"

"Nothing new, alas!" She sniffed again. She sighed. "Tristram positively will not work. He won't take the least responsibility."

As twenty times before, on similar occasions, Blaise offered the stock suggestion that his brother-in-law was a poet and as such was presumably exempt from human responsibilities. But her answer to that was "nonsense!" And she recounted anew her sum of woes. Instead of remaining at his work-table all day, like every other decent married man, he was forever running away into the forest. Seeking what he presumed to call inspiration! Inspiration indeed! He would come home saying that he had been talking with the fairies; but a middle aged married man has no business talking with—fairies. And now that Eugenie Louise had come to Villa Mirador, Tristram was worse than ever. "He is impossible!" declared Alicia hotly. "Actually, if you will believe it, he takes the child with him on his rambles. His influence is simply deplorable. He talks to her openly, without shame, about love. Plans the future for her—romantically, undoing all the really practical advice that I, as a mere woman, can give her. Fancy! Fancy putting ideas about love into the head of any girl of nineteen. It is highly unsuitable."

"Shocking!" agreed the secretary, lowering his eyes. "So—I'm to lock Tristram in this afternoon, to keep him at work?"

She explained briefly that an agent was expected that

afternoon, from Rodenheim the banker, to talk about a loan—business matters. And Tristram simply was required to meet him. Blaise must see to it; he must keep the gates locked fast, and on no account let his brother-in-law escape till the agent had come and gone.

“How about Eugenie Louise?” he inquired.

“A woman’s place is always the home,” decreed Alicia. “Even if you have to lock her into it. The domestic virtues give a girl her only abiding charm. As soon as she finishes with her rice pudding, my niece will take her daily lesson in applied dish washing. A young and lovely female has no time for—rambles in the forest.”

“Good!” exclaimed Blaise the faithful. “I lock Eugenie Louise in, and romance out.”

His sister smiled her approval of his diligence. She did even better. With a glance over her shoulder to make quite sure that Marcelle and Oswald were not looking, she opened her reticule again, explored its depths, and withdrew no less than five, yellow, clinking florins, which she handed to Blaise without his asking for them. “My debt,” she explained, “for your coming away down here to the gates. Thank you for your assistance, dear brother. And do be careful not to waste so much good money.”

“The old screw!” was Blaise’s comment, when his benefactress had gone to join the others. But he had no time to dwell for long on the sorrows and humiliations, the rewards and slim satisfactions of his new career, for, hardly had his sister left him—so swiftly was history made that summer afternoon—before the secretary’s attention was attracted by the oddest figure which came limping down the highway.

Bent and dingy, his gray hair escaping below the brim of a most frightfully battered hat, about his gnarled neck a red cotton handkerchief, he shuffled along at an old

man's pace, bearing under one arm a roll of yellow papers, while in the other hand he held a paste bucket and long handled brush. He halted before the gates, surveying the stone walls with the air of a critic. Then stepping forward without a word of by-your-leave to Blaise, he proceeded to slap against the smooth gray surface a flaming yellow poster, which bore at its head the arms of the kingdom.

"Here, here!" protested Blaise. "You can't do that here."

"I've done it," croaked the old man.

"How dare you?"

"'Ficial duty," the old wretch replied importantly. "I'm paid for it, too. Same as to be town crier. Municipal appointment. Better read it, gen'leman. There's money in it."

However scornful, and properly so, of the boor's invitation, Blaise could hardly help casting a glance at the scandalous yellow blotch glaring at him from the park wall. Just for a second his keen black eyes rested on the printed notice with the unmistakable official arms at the top. But if old Anselm the crier had promised himself a laugh at the expense of the scornful aristocrat who, after all, was not averse to reading how money could be made, he was disappointed. For with a languid wave of his white hand, Blaise dismissed him.

"But what do you think of it?" asked Anselm the ancient, pointing the handle of his dripping brush at the poster.

"I've no wish to discuss it."

"It's all wrong," was the old fellow's own opinior, expressed in a groan. "They'd oughtn't to back down. Do without him. We may need him, but don't let him think so. If we conservatives had our say, we'd lock the door and tell the striker to go the devil. He'd come back

when he was hungry, fast enough. Shame—the way them radicals like him upsets everything with their demands for this and that. It's us responsible property holders what ought to run the country." And with an emphatic shake of his shaggy, dingy old head, officialdom shuffled away through the white dust of the highroad.

Instantly Blaise turned to read the contents of the offending poster.

"Incredible!" he exclaimed. A second time he gave himself to a study of the notice. "Twenty five thousand crowns!" whispered Alicia's brother respectfully. "Decidedly worth thinking about, my friend."

A third time he read the thing, head forward, hands behind him clasping the key, feet apart, thin nose in the air. Word by word he conned the lines, his lips moving as he repeated them half aloud, savoring them. And so intent was Blaise on his lesson that he never saw the figure of a middle-aged poet, gentlemanly in spite of an awful straw hat, who cautiously approached the grille from the park, stopped short at sight of his unconscious secretary, glanced anxiously back as if for some companion, and then quickly edged through the open gate without a sound. But once outside, he could not resist a chuckle.

Blaise spun around. "Tristram! You here?"

The poet bowed, hand on heart.

"No!" insisted the secretary, heroically recalling his thoughts from the poster. He closed his eyes. "At this hour my employer, true to his promise to his wife, is seated at his desk hard at work. He has an appointment with Rodenheim's agent. He is—he is doing whatever is appropriate for a man of business, or even a poet, in the full current of the afternoon's affairs. Confound it, sir, don't you realize you're busy?"

"How?" inquired Tristram.

"Alicia said so," was Blaise's prompt answer. "She

was so positive you would not go abroad this afternoon that—”

“She bade you lock the gates,” said Tristram, pointing to the tell-tale key.

“If so, it was to keep away any strangers—any element of romance, so to speak—which might distract you. She thinks of everything. And so,” begged Blaise, “for the love of your wedded wife, Tristram—to preserve your unsullied reputation as a trustworthy husband—to earn money for my salary—do, for God’s sake, Tristram, go back to work!”

“You almost persuade me,” said the poet. “My inclination is to work, unquestionably. Indeed, I was beginning to. But Blaise—!” He drew his secretary close to him by the sleeve. “What if somebody comes to you, after her aunt is gone—aged nineteen—in rose colored muslin—with dark eyes that plead and a smile that promises—slim fingers that twine in yours, Blaise, and suggests a walk toward Queen’s Wood? Does one work,” demanded the poet hotly, “or does one go a-strolling I ask you.”

Blaise murmured some wretched phrases about his duty, whereat Tristram replied that his duty consisted mainly in paying strict heed to his employer, who paid Blaise to be deaf and blind for all the afternoon. And the thrust of his hand deep into his breeches pocket, the pressure into Blaise’s limp white palm of certain shining tokens, gave point to his observations.

“The reward of faithfulness,” said the poet crisply.

“Just what Alicia observed, on handing me a trifle for my trouble in locking the gates,” returned Blaise ruefully.

“I am glad to have set a higher estimate than she on what is after all a masculine virtue,” said Tristram. He had no time to say more. Nor did Blaise consider further how to advance his fortunes. For Eugenie Louise

appeared from the park; and at sight of her whatever plans, hopes, prejudices, or treacheries the men may have been harboring, vanished in the one desire that somebody aged nineteen, all clad in rose, with certain ribbons, and a wide, wide hat, would consider each of them quite the most excellent uncle in the world.

"So sorry to have kept you waiting," she said to Tristram and he almost believed her.

"Always keep a man waiting; it's elementary," returned the poet. "Well, here's the road."

"Are we doing very wrong to run away?" she asked of Blaise. Quite incuriously, sure of his answer and quite indifferent, venturing a speech which she knew would draw sparks just because, being nineteen and a girl, she liked the sport.

But Blaise had played all games and against many adversaries. He refused her lead. He grew limp and doughy instead of bristling indignantly, as was expected of him. If he assented to her suggestion, it was merely with a dolorous head-shake, a faint, bored smile, and a vaguely protesting movement of his hand. He said not a single word, which was contemptible of the fellow.

"But we can't stay indoors all day, on a day like this!" His very limpness and indifference vexed her. "Don't you understand, Uncle Blaise?" she went on, quite in the tone one is told (nowadays) to use with a chuckle-headed, stupid child—a silky, oily, cooing, persuasive, reasoning tone. He spread his hands; he closed his eyes; he was detestable. "All prim and proper!" she flamed scornfully. "Can we, Uncle Tristram?" she demanded of the complacent poet.

"It is with the utmost difficulty that I remain even tolerable," that worthy beamed, with a knock to anchor his

old straw hat. "But I suggest, my dove, that we hurry a bit."

"Yes, you'd best," agreed Blaise, suddenly coming awake. "Now that you've got out—eluded the warder"—and he groaned—"leg it, friends. Furthermore, you should certainly get back before—"

"Before Aunt Alicia returns?"

"I ought to tell you, my beloved niece-by-marriage, that my sister's views—and wishes—were unmistakable."

"We'll tell her we went to seek adventures."

"I seem to recall," mused Blaise aloud, "that your aunt has not wholly recovered from the shock of the last time you—"

"Oh damn!" exclaimed the poet. "Come along, youngster."

Blaise slapped his marble brow. "Wait!" he cried, as if suddenly inspired. "Idiot that I am not to think of it at once! If your aunt should return before you—which God forbid!—I'll tell her that you're following in the footsteps of our illustrious sovereign, to whom be long life and glory."

"What?"

"What on earth do you mean?" demanded Tristram.

For answer, his secretary pointed with a superb gesture to the flaming poster with the key of the gates. "Read!" he ordered briefly, stepping aside.

"Aloud," amended Tristram, as the girl turned to look at the announcement, "if you must stop to read the thing at all. "And with expression, my dear, always."

Quickly she crossed the white gravel; lightly, with a toss of her airy skirts between her finger-tips, she stepped up on one of the stone seats for a closer view; and with a little gasp of amazement she reported what was printed on the yellow bill beneath the arms of the kingdom:

“BY THE MINISTERS OF STATE”
“A PROCLAMATION”

“Be it known to all Citizens that our Sovereign Lord the Prince Julian has pleased himself to absent himself from his accustomed places, as determined by hereditary right and the Constitution, and to disappear to parts unknown. And so, for the security of the State, the peace of Europe, and our Ruler’s own safety, we urge all Citizens diligently to seek His Royal Highness, with a view to effecting his Restoration to his throne and his Constitutional Duty, Privileges, and Position.

FIFTY THOUSAND CROWNS REWARD.”

“Humph!” was Tristram’s comment on the peace of Europe and constitutional government.

“How—how darling of him!” cried the girl delightedly. She clapped her hands, then gave one to each of the gentleman as a reward for their stepping forward to assist her to step down; she sprang down from the seat. “Uncle Blaise, you are right as always. Tell Aunt Alicia that we’ve gone on the loose, just like the vanished Prince!”

“No, no, no!” cried Blaise. “I’ll say that you’ve gone to look for him and fetch him back. To earn fifty thousand crowns, you know.”

But already she had Tristram by the hand, and was hurrying him away with a dancing step along the shady footpath. She might have never dreamed of a vanished prince. Indeed, so gaily she laughed, and so fast she ran, that never a look did Eugenie Louise bestow even on the obvious, idle vagabond, still lounging with his pack beneath one of the roadside trees.

But the vagabond saw Eugenie Louise—as who, indeed, would not?—And hardly were she and her en-

chained, enchanted poet past before the fellow arose, and with a smile he moved to where a much perplexed and very thoughtful Blaise still lingered at the gates of Villa Mirador.

CHAPTER XI

THE beggar nodded condescendingly. His flash of smile was curiously engaging; beneath its caked grime his face showed features not at all displeasing; he was obviously young and supple and strong. But the sum of these excellent qualities somehow failed to impress the doleful private secretary. He met the fellow's cheerful grin with no more cordiality than was expressed by a vicious "Move along, you vagabond!"

The other turned to follow with his eyes a stout gray figure and another pink and slim, now disappearing in the distance. "Will they be coming back?" he inquired with the utmost simplicity.

"Yes," conceded Blaise drily. "But that's no concern of yours. Move."

The beggar bowed low. "I'd like to obey your honor," he answered. "For I can see that you are a person of the very first importance, while I am less than the dust. But move—? Lose the chance of another look at her? It can't be done." And he resolutely installed his profaning person on one of the stone seats, lolling back at his ease, with another look at Blaise above his folded arms.

The secretary shrugged. "Are you aware," he inquired sarcastically, "who that young lady might be?"

"Precisely," came the crisp answer. "That is the girl I intend to marry."

Moments arrive in the lives of the best of us, like Blaise, when words fail utterly, or when they are quite superfluous. If for a second the outraged Blaise strug-

gled to express a few of the feelings which the beggar's preposterous impudence set flaming in his breast, he wisely abandoned the attempt at once. He did the next best thing of all, which was to pretend that he had not even heard the fellow's blasphemy. Retreating with dignity, he closed and locked the tall iron gates.

"Be off!" he ordered harshly, once safe inside.

"My little man," returned the other calmly from his seat, "it is fearfully silly of you to lock those gates. I shall come in whenever I care to. I go wherever I wish. I'm to be found in quite the most unexpected places—"

"Indeed!" sneered Blaise. He was vexed that he had spent so much breath on this base churl. He could not explain to himself his odd desire to linger and watch the fellow, even to hear his talk. Absurd! He got himself in hand. "You'll never get into Villa Mirador," he assured the beggar warmly.

The latter chuckled. "When I wish to enter Villa Mirador, which appears likely," he replied, "I will ring that bell by the gates." He waved his hand imperiously. "Answer promptly, little man."

The secretary laughed.

"Just to make it interesting," offered the rogue of the highway, "I'll bet you."

Blaise smote his breast. He was superb in his disdain. I—bet with you, with a beggar?"

"I might have known it," rejoined the rascal, folding his arms again. "No money, as usual."

The secretary reddened. He pulled out the salary he had just received from Alicia and Tristram for his afternoon's work. "Here are fifteen florins which say you'll never enter these gates, my lad."

"Here's all I possess." He showed a greasy penny which he fished from some dingy hole in his clothes. "It

says that within one hour, you will let me into Villa Mirador yourself."

"Nonsense!" Blaise felt himself again. He pocketed his money with a flourish. It was an amusing, silly episode after all, this parley with a ragged ne'er-do-well. "Nonsense!" And with a little shake of the grille, to make sure that all was secure against this or any other marauder, he strolled away toward the house, serene in the consciousness of duty well performed.

A half hour passed, drowsy and sunny as an idler's dream of heaven. The vagabond did not stir, save that for a moment he turned about to scan the yellow poster on the wall. His head cocked to one side, a light smile playing over his lips, one finger keeping time as he softly intoned the Minister's rounded sentences, he made one think of Puck or Ariel, in his whimsical mockery of things vastly important. He read the notice through, then stretched his long arms and legs, which felt a bit stiff from his laziness, and then quickly settled back in a frowsy heap on the bench, as there returned along the footpath the two fine ladies and the fine, fat gentleman who had gone to pay their respects to the newest Brissac heir.

"Now heaven defend me, but it's De Soulter!" murmured the vagabond. "If the brute should recognize me—!" For a second he sat up, as if planning an immediate retreat. Then his eyes were caught anew by the notice about the vanished prince, and lighted wickedly. "If he takes me for the footpad, I'll tell the old lad something to surprise him," decided the vagabond. "Intercede for me on high, O patron saint of thieves, in case your servant is compelled to lie a little." And hastily he composed anew into an attitude of sorrowful wretchedness, as the gentry approached the gates.

"Here is another of those vulgar notices," remarked

Alicia. "Postitively, their Excellencies want us all to join the secret police. To my mind—but you gentlemen are never interested in what a mere woman thinks," she added in a resigned and properly humble manner. It produced its effect. She puffed Oswald a shade tighter.

"Quite right," he agreed oracularly. "Matters such as restoring a lost prince to his throne—the Head to the Crown, if I may so express it—may safely be left to Us." He tapped his breast pocket; he nodded toward the poster as to an old but obscure acquaintance. "I may tell you confidentially," he said to his companions, lowering his voice. "that I knew all about the Prince's departure—of his going on strike, as I believe it is called among working-men, some little time ago. My friend the Minister of Police—"

"Oh, *do* tell us!" implored Alicia.

"Positively, you must excuse me. But I will say this," the great man conceded, "that when I visited a Certain Personage in connection with apprehending the gang of scoundrels who robbed and assaulted me in Queen's Wood, that Personage confided to me then that the Prince had—struck, if you will allow the expression." He paused to observe the effect of this stunning revelation on the women. It was apparently satisfactory, for the vagabond cowering by the gate heard Oswald's voice gather strength and majesty. And what the poor wretch heard made him sink to a still smaller compass, his head between his knees. "If I should choose to seek personally for our Sovereign, which my health will not allow," declared Oswald, "I should have an enormous advantage over everyone."

"Oh, what?" inquired Marcelle dutifully.

Rolling his eyes from one lady to the other, Oswald asked if either of them, upon reflection, could describe

the Prince. They reflected, and confessed, to their own surprise, that they could not. Like the rest of the world, they had viewed the young monarch at his coronation—they had seen a resplendent figure in dalmatic, amice, cap-of-maintenance, and crown, holding the orb and sceptre, ermined, sworded, jewelled and collared, a Presence, an abstract Idea, an Idol, a living Symbol. They had seen him in his panoply of war with gleaming cuirass and eagled helmet, mounted, remote, solitary and superb at the head of his warriors; they had seen official portraits of the Sovereign by limners from foreign lands, who made him to resemble Jove, Endymion, St. Sebastian, a merchant, or an amoeba with many angles, according to their respective lights. But of the expression in their ruler's eyes, his coloring, his manner of moving, the way he laughed—by which most surely one may know a man, neither Alicia nor Marcelle, could be at all positive.

"But *you* would know the Prince," asserted Alicia with confidence.

"And how?" smiled Oswald.

"Tease!" sighed Marcelle, who had decided to be civil.

He smiled with easy superiority. He sought in his breast pocket, which is not easy when one's sleeves are fashionably tight, and one is sixty pounds overweight. "Look!" he commanded, and fetching forth a little card, he showed the ladies a drawing, spirited and strong, of a young man's handsome head. "The Prince!" announced Oswald. "His very likeness, exactly copied, entrusted to me by a Certain Personage. On the back," he added, turning over the card, "is his description as filed at police headquarters."

The ladies studied the likeness with an interest which would appear strange in these days when pictures of persons in society attract nobody at all. Their quaint, old-time exclamations of admiration over Royalty's graceful

charm and manly bearing would sound ridiculous and incredible in an enlightened age like our own, when everybody is aware that human perfections are to be found only among mechanics and minor actresses.

"You'd know him at once, anywhere," declared Marcelle the blonde, turning aside, for she had become very weary. "We look to see you win the reward, my friend."

"Unquestionably, if ever I search for our Sovereign," answered Oswald seriously, returning the picture to his pocket. "And, in spite of my uncertain health, it may be that I shall consider obeying the Minister's decree. Besides, I have strong views on the rights of the working people to leave their tasks without proper warning. They should be compelled," quoth Oswald sonorously, "to stay on their thrones. By law. My opinion is shared by all really responsible business men. But speaking of Prince Julian," he continued in lighter vein, "every time that I recall one particular story about him, I laugh consumedly." And he looked from one lady to the other expectantly.

Marcelle cast up her eyes, then veiled them primly. Imperceptibly she moved away.

"Tell your story to *me*," invited Alicia. "I'm sure that any tale you tell, especially about Royalty, is not only interesting but elevating."

"Pity the poor!" chanted the vagabond. His chin was on his knees; his hat was pulled low over his brow.

"Good fellow," replied Marcelle, who was always most kind to desolate men, "I haven't a penny about me. But rouse yourself. Listen to this gentleman's tale about royalty. That will brighten your cheerless day." She laughed, as Alicia drew De Souter aside to listen, all attention; and the good man proceeded to unfold his tale in whispers. "Disgraced!" gaily fluted the blonde Marcelle. "I am not included. Haven't you a tale to tell me, vagabond?" And her perverse eyes, blue and pale as an

arctic sky, dwelt for a moment on the fellow curiously.

"You ought to be afraid of me," he answered.

She shook her head disdainfully. Serenely, she met the smile the fellow sent her. It was as though by some magic he was not indeed the bundle of dirty rags he appeared, nor she a very elegant lady. For the instant, they spoke as merely a personable youth and a strangely troubling woman. "Did you know that I saw you an hour ago," she murmured, "lying yonder in the shade? I looked at you as I ran past, though I did not know it. You were smiling then, too. But—I wasn't in the least afraid of you."

"Look at me now," he ordered, just above a whisper. He had not moved save to raise his head a bit.

She shivered. She shook her golden head, as if to forbid a thought which had come to her from somewhere. She turned toward Alicia abruptly. "Good bye, my dear," said Marcelle. "It is high time I was safely home."

"So glad we met, my love." The older woman had unlocked the gates by now with her own key. "Good bye, Oswald."

"And—and you will mention me to your charming niece?" entreated De Soulter, holding to the hand which Alicia extended him.

"With pleasure," she softly beamed, with a gentle pressure which thrilled the good soul to his boot-soles.

"Mention me too!" said the vagabond, grinning.

But with a cry of righteous indignation, Alicia promptly closed the gates and locked them capably. "Impudent!" she cried as she moved away. And "Fellow—!" boomed Oswald's loyal echo.

The villain waved a gritty paw, elegantly. "The lady awaits Your Magnificence!" he announced.

"Alas!" came from Marcelle. Then she faced Oswald charmingly. Her smile was like June. "Won't you

please run along, dear Oswald?" she begged. "Leave me. I've had to talk to you for two long hours on end. And you are such a paralyzing bore, my dear."

"I, madame? A bore? Unheard of! I—"

"Good heavens, he's beginning again!" cried the distressed lady. "Vagabond," she called, won't you protect me?"

He was on his feet in a flash—slim, agile, threatening. "Move, ass!" he commanded Oswald, in tones like those of irritated stage royalty. And as the stout gentleman blustered, "Depart, decamp, go, vanish, disappear!"

"Come, come!" protested Oswald, his eyes rolling. And then he stared, chop-fallen. The vagabond pulled his hat still lower. "Incredible!" gasped De Soulter, giving ground. "Good Gad!" And he fumbled in his pocket for the little picture.

"Shoosh!" urged the other, waving him away. "Out!"

"It's he!" shouted the fat one, backing away with amazing agility. "But—but it can't be. It's—now where the devil *have* I seen the brute?" cried De Soulter peevishly.

"Nowhere. Hand over that picture."

Oswald gobbled. He turned about.

"Ah, would you!" cried the vagabond vengefully, arresting the stout gentleman by a hold on his padded shoulder. "And now—that picture, old lad, if you please." And his grip sank into Oswald like steel, implacably.

His victim writhed and twisted; he puffed hotly; he flung his short arms about.

"And to think," sighed Marcelle delightedly, "that never till now have I seen men fighting!"

The vagabond looked at her, holding Oswald at arm's length. "This isn't fighting, lady," he corrected. "This is just exercise. "Now," he growled fiercely, in his best

outlaw manner, twitching the card from Oswald's clutch-fingers, "run before I eat you, chops."

It was as though he had spoken magic words. Gasp-ing, the master of Queen's Wood backed away from the profaning, painful grasp of the robber, and stared anew.

"Not—the Prince?" asked Marcelle indifferently.

"I—it's—by Gad, I believe he's—there can't be two—I—I'm almost sure he—"

"Run, I said!" the outlaw shouted, advancing with an arm upraised; and before that threat which recalled earlier and more painful happenings in his crowded life, Os-wald started a retreat, which became a rout, which looked like a panic as he finally stopped running a hundred yards down the highway. Such was his very natural agitation, that he clean forgot the blonde and frail Marcelle, in her pretty clothes, abandoned to the mercies of one who, if he were not a prince, was a dangerous, hedgerow tramp.

"It was exceedingly kind of you," said the lady in question, "to dispose of him so nicely." She extended her thin hand; she half closed her pale blue eyes, and turned her head aside. "You may!" she permitted with a sigh, as she felt the brush of the vagabond's lips on her long fingers. She shivered, drew back her fingers, then gave them to him again, withdrew her hand, laid it against her smooth white cheek. "I thank you. You've as good as saved my life." She sighed again, sent him a glance beneath her lashes, hesitated, then made as if to rest herself an instant on the stone bench, fluttered by the danger she had just so happily escaped. "You—you may speak with me, beggar," said Marcelle superbly.

But the dull rogue merely puckered his brows. He made no move to sit beside her at all, or even to respond in the commonest way to her generosity. "It really won't do to have you sit there," he said suddenly, without any warning. And I assure you she sprang to her feet in

a fine temper indeed. "No," insisted the beggar candidly. "You see, I'm waiting here for the very dearest girl. And if the dearest girl returns and finds me seated beside a woman beautiful and strange and enticing as Salome—well, what would happen?" he queried, his head on one side.

Really, it was too absurd! She suppressed her rage; she managed a smile.

"No woman likes to have a man talk to any other woman," explained the beggar positively and patiently. "Alms, lady?" he added in his professional whine.

She turned away. "In spite of appearances," said Madame De Gerouville presently, after another glance at the fellow, "I believe you're a deserving case. If you really are in need, as you assert, I shall be at home on Thursday, after five."

"I'm not the vanished prince," he warned her, pocketing the picture.

"Exactly!" was Marcelle's reply. Which one could take in any one of a thousand ways. Which probably was what Marcelle intended. She turned to him again. Again she extended her pale hand—such a slight little hand, yet which could give and hold what many men might count most precious. And the strange beggar had just received her finger-tips into his most dreadful paw, very humbly, when round the angle of the wall appeared a flying cloud of pink muslin and ribbons, which hardly checked its flight at even the sight of an elegant lady taking a ceremonious farewell of a person a shade less shocking than a chimney sweep.

"I'm so frightfully late!" she gasped in dismay, going straight to the grille. She shook the gate, then tugged at the bell her hand on her fluttering heart.

"The dearest girl?" softly jibed Marcelle, with raised eyebrows. "Does Alicia know?" Then she laughed, as

if the vagabond had answered her two questions, when actually the sight of Eugenie Louise appeared to have struck him dumb and witless. "Lucky beggar!" laughed Madame De Gerouville, as she walked away, and her laughter was without sun or fragrance.

There came no answer to the girl's appeal at the gate. She waited an instant, then turned. The vagabond, kneeling on the gravel, had suddenly become vastly busy searching in his dusty pack. "You beggar there," she demanded. "Has a lady come in at these gates?"

"I saw a fairy princess come out," the fellow threw back over his shoulder.

"Intolerable!"

He raised his hands to call Heaven to be his witness. "Always give a woman the answer she wants—if you can guess it," he observed. "As a matter of fact," he added, "a lady did come to the Villa about ten minutes ago. Were she in *my* family," remarked the vagabond, "I couldn't get on with her."

"Aunt Alicia!" cried the unfortunate girl. "To the life. This—this is simply disastrous." And again she sounded a desperate appeal on the bell. "Will nobody come to open the gate for me?"

"I'm sorry," mourned the beggar, "but ringing that bell won't help you a bit. And it's all my fault. You see," he continued, as the girl eyed him doubtfully and with marked distaste, "there was a fussy little beast here a while ago—"

"Blaise!" she translated.

"Who said that I couldn't come in. I answered that when I wished to come in, I'd ring that bell. So—"

She wrung her hands. "How stupid!"

"But I am sure that I can be of help to you," the vagabond continued modestly, "because, as it happens, I'm a very skilfull magician."

"I am very sorry," returned Eugenie Louise, with the distant manner a young lady always uses with undesirable youths of the opposite sex, "but I don't believe you, beggar. Because, you see, there's no such thing as magic in the world any longer."

She sighed a little as she said this; but from his response you would have thought that she had no more than flung him a challenge.

"What's that?" he cried sharply, with a frown. But she made no reply. She turned as if to renew her summons at the gate. For the last moment he paused, and then, almost shyly, with lowered eyes (though a flicker of smile played over his lips), the vagabond said tremulously, "I had believed so myself, all my life, until—"

If she was listening, she made no sign. But so quiet was the hour, so solitary the place, that it is sure that every word of what he murmured came to her as clear as distant trumpet tones.

"One day in Queen's Wood," the youth was saying hardily,—

"No, no!" cried Eugenie Louise.

"I met Bob the Bullet, and—"

"Crookfinger!" She turned in a flash, her eyes all alright. But in the same instant, before he could reach her side, the girl drew back trembling. "No, it's not possible!" she cried, and her dark eyes widened with something which seemed almost like fear of him. She shrank back against the grille, her hands pressed against her breast. "I—I must not even think of that dreadful day," she stammered. It was as if she was repeating an exorcism, a charm against evil. "My inexcusable madness—my indiscretion. Oh," she cried miserably and fiercely, "it never happened, that day in Queen's Wood!"

"Speaking of magic!" he answered slowly, as she paused. "Black magic, the poisonest kind—that's been

to work on *you!*!" Ruefully he took in each detail of the utterly feminine picture she presented—its color of dismay and shyness, of dainty disdain, its contentment with comfort, of satisfaction in her delicate dress. So Romney might have painted her. The rich dim background of the summer park became her. Villa Mirador, old and rich and exquisite, was waiting her. "The marvel," said the vagabond at length, "is that, in spite of the magic which has tried to change you—oh, I'd know Bob the Bullet anywhere, God bless him and his velveteens!"

She shivered.

"Is it true?" he accused hotly. "You want to forget that day—that night in the little house—the—"

"I have forgotten it. Utterly. In fact, I don't know what you are talking about," came her answer, very calmly. She looked aside. "You see," added Eugenie Louise, "I have promised my Aunt Alicia to be a perfect lady. I'm sorry," she concluded—very firmly indeed, considering all things—"but in you I look upon a total stranger, vagabond."

"Bob!" he entreated miserably.

"You are speaking," she reminded him, "to Miss Buchanan. And if you wish to be useful to her—though I can't offer you any financial reward—you will be good enough to call my uncle Tristram immediately. That gentleman talking with Madame De Gerouville."

"Good!" The beggar stepped out into the highroad. He had recovered his poise almost instantly; he was again the smiling, quicksilver, odd-looking chap who had made Marcelle stop and talk, who had shocked Alicia, who had frightened honest Oswald. A moment before he was in the depths; now he looked fit enough to command an army. And indeed it was with the voice of a peppery colonel of cavalry at the head of a column that

he called to the distant poet. "Tristram!" he summoned, with a gesture.

"Oh!" protested Eugenie Louise, a little scared. "Not quite so loud, good vagabond, and much more politely, please."

"He's coming," shrugged the beggar. "I knew he would. Looks like a thunder storm. Hail, best of poets and uncles!" chuckled the impudent scoundrel to the approaching bard.

Tristram gave him a glance; his eyes travelled to his niece who was still before the gates with every evidence of a surprising distress and confusion. "My love," observed Tristram, "if my memory serves, I bade you hurry straight home to the Villa. But I find you, if my eyes are still good, delaying to speak with this most scandalous beggar. I utterly adore you, my sweet, but I confess you quite surprise me."

"I'm surprised at myself," was his niece's surprising answer, as she shook her head sadly. "Oh, uncle, do you know the agony of being false to one's ideals?"

"What's this?"

"Ask him," the girl replied. But before the puzzled poet could speak to the vagabond, the latter had advanced with a bow.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "I am the grandson of the Pied Piper of Hamelin."

"What?"

"My uncle," pursued the beggar. "was Sinbad the Sailor. Snow White's my sister; Captain Kidd is my brother—"

"Ask him who he is himself," prompted Eugenie Louise in a whisper, standing on tip-toe to speak into her astounded uncle's ear.

"I don't have to," returned the poet promptly. "He's

simply an infernal liar. Now then, my dear, in with you! It's late."

But the girl only shook her head disconsolately. Not a look did she send at the discomfited beggar. "Indeed," she mourned, "it's *too* late, Uncle. I can never go home now. The worst has happened."

"What?" roared the master of Villa Mirador.

"I am disgraced forever," sighed his little charge. "I can never, never face the consequences of my latest indiscretion." And she wept very heartily against her guardian's shoulder.

"What's all this?" the latter stammered, staring down at the sad little figure shrinking in the fold of his arm. Then, as his rolling eye fell on the vagabond, a certainty flashed through his foggy mind like lightning. "Villain!" stormed Tristram, "I'll settle with you for this!"

"No—no!" cried the tearful one, poisoning him as he made an impetuous lunge at the rogue. "You don't understand. I said—the *very* worst has happened."

"My darling, you don't mean—?" A burst of sobbing answered his question. "Your aunt—?" A murmur of confirmation rose to him. "Alicia's come home before us?" Oh—oh, this is indeed terrible!" And the poet's noble head was bowed beneath the agony of his chagrin and pain.

"Once upon a time," broke in the vagabond's cool voice on the stricken silence which followed the girl's trembling avowal, "there lived a very estimable poet, who occasionally ran away from home. On excursions with which his sister—"

"My sister!" echoed Tristram irritably. "Damn it, Alicia's my wife."

"With which his wife," amended the beggar, "did not wholly sympathize. And so, when the poet returned to Villa Mirador after hours, he sometimes required the

services of a serviceable lie or liar, to keep the peace."

"Who the devil are you?" demanded Tristram.

"The liar," announced the beggar. "As you have already observed."

"Oh!" breathed Eugenie Louise, raising her head. "I felt sure he'd help us."

"My dear child, I can't ask favors of a vagabond."

But the latter took him up shortly. "Who talked of favors?" he demanded scornfully. "If I imperil the safety of my immortal soul to get you out of trouble, old boy, I expect to be well paid for it."

Enfolding his tender charge anew with a protecting arm, the poet eyed the stranger doubtfully. "What's your plan, liar?"

"A little tale," the fellow replied, "which you will relate beautifully. Walking near these gates, after hours of the most severe labor, in company with—"

"His niece," put in Eugenie Louise, modestly but distinctly.

"You heard cries for help—assassin—murder! Brave as a lion, you darted to the rescue."

"In spite of my prayers and entreaties to be careful," interrupted the girl.

"And there," said the vagabond, warming to his work, "you saw a poor young vagabond clinging to these gates, cruelly beset by—"

"Royal Rurals," contributed Eugenie Louise with decision.

"Exactly. They were endeavoring to rob him—collecting, as they said, his income tax. You rescued him from rapacious clutches," concluded the fellow briefly, "and that's why you were late getting home."

Tristram scratched his head.

"If I may venture to add the feminine touch, without which no work of art is complete," suggested his niece

with becoming diffidence, "let it be understood that you heard this unfortunate's plaintive cries away up at the Villa. There was a strange appeal in them you could not resist. In spite of yourself, the call of the vagabond dragged you from your work."

The poet was staring at the beggar fixedly. "Eh—? Yes, I dare say that's exactly what happened. Queer, though, somehow—!" But he recovered himself; clapped the rogue on the shoulder; fumbled through his pockets for some money—to discover that he was penniless, and bade the fellow wait by the gates till he could get to the house and send him a suitable reward. "I'll send it by my secretary," said Tristram with high relish. But the other declined. He had, he said, his own price.

"Indeed!" exclaimed the poet, taken aback.

"To prove your tale—and to pay me for teaching it," said the beggar, "take me with you."

"To the Villa?"

"Just there."

"But, good God," cried Tristram sore distressed, "how can I take you to Villa Mirador? You're the step-brother to Ananias."

"Exactly."

"Take him," urged Eugenie Louise in a whisper, her lips barely moving, not looking at all at the eager, smiling beggar. "This is no time, my dear uncle, to consider the proprieties."

And so it came about that they rang the bell again tremendously; and Tristram shouted loud and long for Anthony, for the gardener, for even his wife Alicia; and Eugenie Louise began to laugh; and the vagabond gave blood-curdling imitations of a hunting horn, till finally, just as all three of them had laid hold of the bell-pull, down the driveway, cool and debonair and scornful, came Blaise the secretary.

"Open the gates, imbecile!" stormed Tristram.

"Yes," cried the vagabond, "don't you see *I'm* ringing?"

"What—?" But in the face of the renewed cries of his employer and the silken entreaties of his niece, there really was nothing the secretary could do but swing the gates wide open, admitting the girl, who without a look behind fled away up the drive like a shower of rose leaves before a storm.

"Come in, brave vagabond," invited Tristram.

"This person?" objected Blaise.

"This—this friend of mine," corrected the poet, starting after his flying niece.

The vagabond struck an attitude. Hand on hip, ragged cape thrown over his shoulder, his ancient hat most smartly cocked, he strode through the gates with the air of a conqueror. He halted to look the secretary up and down; then he held out his palm negligently.

"You win," Blaise sighed. And like the honest gambler he was (usually), he poured into the extended paw the clinking florins he had wagered.

The other eyed them as they lay there with a humorous contempt. He looked at Blaise benevolent and kindly. "Here!" he replied, restoring the money so promptly that the secretary had no time either to refuse or to draw away. "Buy yourself a drink, poor fellow!" And with that, moving as though the world and all that is therein were his to order and require, he strolled away towards Villa Mirador.

Slowly the secretary considered the money in his hand; he pocketed it with an air of resignation. He closed the gates again, and stood looking up the way the vagabond had followed. In the golden twilight he stood there a long time, a black and somehow sinister figure, thinking, thinking.

"Fifty thousand crowns!" mused Blaise aloud, thinking of the notice on the wall. "I wonder who that vagabond may be. In any event," he concluded sagely, virtuously, "it is always a mistake to admit strangers—even unknown beggars—to the bosom of a happy household."

CHAPTER XII

THE days which followed—it must be acknowledged—appeared to furnish a kind of proof for Blaise's dictum. It is sure, at any rate, that life at the Villa wasn't what it once had been, pronounced Anthony gloomily, what with the missus savager'n ever and the old man chucklin' like he'd some bally secret. Change had come. The customs, the perfumed dust of many, many years were stirred and tossed about—though one could not quite say by whom or by what. For it seemed incredible that the mere presence of a girl however lovely could avail to change the spirit of Villa Mirador. It would have been absurd to assert that a casual vagabond, flaunting himself for an hour in the sun of Tristram's presence, or dodging Alicia's storms in laughing glee, could affect the life of the beautiful old demesne. But yet—

Perhaps indeed, as Blaise shrewdly observed, it was only that the odd unrest, the vague apprehensions, the tingling little flames of patriotism which thrilled in those days to every corner of the sunny land, were borne to the seclusion of Villa Mirador by the very winds. There was thunder in the air. High in the misty blue, a seer had seen the black war eagles. Across the wheat fields moved the shadows of broad, sombre wings. To the little city came ambassadors; in lamplit bureaus late at night, tired officers and clerks wrote endless lists of names; others, in arsenals, counted guns and sabres. "It is nothing—it is only rumor—the Thing is unbelievable," men assured their anxious wives. "It's sure to come," they whispered one another in the markets. "Every

man will do his duty, naturally," Blaise declared, who had the promise of duty in the clothing supply department. "War?" exclaimed Alicia disdainfully. "I cannot imagine their doing anything which would upset us all so disagreeably." So the talk of various persons, up and down the kingdom. What Tristram and his new-found niece had to say, we do not know. Perhaps they were both so interested in their new relationship that it filled all their thoughts, just as it colored each hour of their absurdly happy days. Nor have we ever been told just what passed through the mind of the strolling vagabond, when he heard men talk of war.

From whatever source however, a new life commenced to flow through Villa Mirador. Imperceptibly, in ways hard to define, the ancient house felt changes in its very fibres. One would have thought that this girl from a distant land, alone, without defense, would have been caught in the mould of Villa Mirador and shaped forever. But she remained as free as one of the flowers in the garden. It is true that she came to learn the charm which resides in delicate aloofness and ordered ways; in the house which had cradled seven generations of gallant gentlefolk, surrounded by antique trophies of their prowess and their beauty, knowing what things the Cordelaers had never done, she could not fail to feel grow in her heart a perception that of her too, in her turn, the littlest Cordelaer, were certain things required. She conformed—if one may use the word where never was imposed a law, a rule, or a way of conduct. It was without knowing it that she yielded to Villa Mirador. But she remained, none the less, Eugenie Louise. A part of the household, she was nevertheless like a new bit of decoration. Gay as a flame, she glowed against her sober background. She was a new rose in Tristram's garden—that age-old place of many beauties. You saw her immedi-

ately you entered Villa Mirador; she colored her surroundings, without being absorbed into their general tone. She stirred things about a bit, as Anthony expressed it very happily.

And now had appeared this rogue of a vagabond. It seemed ridiculous that so shabby, so dusty a villain could count for anything at all in a life which was remote and elegant and fastidious; but as a matter of fact the fellow soon proved himself rather a nuisance. He fluttered Villa Mirador, and rudely. He appeared sometimes to be laughing at them all—laughing in his ragged sleeve, and especially at Blaise, or Anthony, or even at Alicia herself; and it is vastly distressing to all good people to overhear the mockery of their inferiors, if one may still be allowed the use of a word which, I believe, our day considers indelicate. Monseigneur may ignore it, in the grand manner; but the echo of the crossing sweeper's pungent gibe, or the chuckle of the clown, rings in his august ear annoyingly; and so it was with the grandees of Villa Mirador—the truly important folk, I mean, not the poet or the beauty from London. Not that the beggar was ever allowed to enter the house itself, of course. Safe within that citadel of quiet and decency, Alicia was sure she would never encounter the fellow; she had given the strictest orders that on no account should he trail his broken shoes across even the outermost threshold. And it also happened to be the case that, oddly enough, the vagabond, in all his visits and loiterings, never once asked to enter the house. He appeared quite content to linger about the garden, to stretch himself under a tree in the park, to perch on days when the wind was high in the topmost branches of an oak, whence he could overlook the land as he swayed to the wind's cradling. One caught a glimpse of his elfish, elusive figure perhaps at dewy day-break, or underneath the moon; one heard a

quaint singing now and then which could only have been his ; they saw him wave a friendly or mocking greeting as he sped on some unknown errand. He would disappear for days and nights ; he would return at queer hours like eleven in the morning. One came at length to ask if the vagabond had been seen that day ; one wondered at evening if the night would not bring him back, to charm his listeners with his tales of love and bravery, to annoy and shock them with his smiling malice, to thrill and terrify. Pray do not ask me to explain this curious thing. Accept with me the fact of an unknown vagabond's ability quite to upset the order and regular ways of this ancient household—will you ? It happened, or else all the chronicles are written by liars. And such stories as he told— ! The poet listened, in his twilit, tranquil garden, and he felt once more that he was young and firm for high adventure. Alicia, drawn in spite of herself one day to listen, felt a strange horror of the song the vagabond sang them—she thought of forbidding her household from ever exchanging so much as a word with the fellow—with his songs about rebels and marching to music and murder. She felt it was very bad for Tristram to spend any time at all with the rascal ; she was glad that no young lady ever cares for a man who does not wear proper clothes and is quite ineligible from the matrimonial standpoint—and took pains that Eugenie Louise should be busied or amused with quite other matters whenever the voice of the vagabond was heard in the garden, you may be sure. For his air, his bearing, spoke of hardness and dash ; in his eye (for all its dancing gleam of fun) one could read truth and courage and disdain. He was undeniably good looking ; he made them fancy, as sometimes his gestures grew eloquent, that they saw in him a leader of desert horsemen, or a wild voyager in dark valleys of Cathay where rubies might be found,

and savages with silent arrows. He never could be mistaken for anybody respectable.

But of his own land, of his kin or name (if he possessed them), he told less than nothing. To Villa Mirador the vagabond spelled romance and the mystery of youth and all things reprehensible. To Bob the Bullet he was Crookfinger, terror of the woodlands. That is what the vagabond's late companion assured herself each night before she went to sleep—he was the living incarnation of her day of deep disgrace, a dreadful embarrassment. That is what she repeated every morning as she peeped out from between the rosy curtains of her bedroom window to look for—oh, not the vagabond, my dears! Oh, no indeed. Eugenie Louise would have been vexed and hurt, she would have colored most becomingly, had you even suggested such an impropriety. She quite ignored the vagabond, you must understand. Elaborately. She expressed her surprise that her beloved uncle could keep a rascal about the place at all.

And one day the rogue was gone. Another passed, and nobody had seen a sign of him. And it was strange, but by another noon each dweller in the ancient mansion had inquired—oh, casually, of course!—if one or another of the household had any news of him. Madame De Gerouville inquired. For some reason she had been calling at Villa Mirador almost every day. A fortnight dragged along, and the vagabond was by way of dropping back into the limbo of small things forgotten—or so it appeared, for they talked about him less and less, they ceased recalling his ways and his tales to one another, then to themselves very likely.

And presently the great Alicia, always planning largely, saw the dawn of a day which promised to reward her patient watching for fair weather. It was the day when she received a call from Oswald De Souter; it was also

the day on which a grave ambassador, stiff with gold and pride, was given his passports by those who led the little land in the absence of the sovereign still on strike. It was when the Council, weary and rudderless, pledged itself in the country's name to give the striker everything he wished if only he would come immediately back to work, and sent the news broadcast by couriers fleet as the very wind to every town and city.

CHAPTER XIII

THE garden at Villa Mirador lay drowsing in mellow sunshine. A high wall shut out the disturbing world—just now so particularly noisy and jarring. The gardener's ladder leaning against the coping would tempt nobody to climb up for a look beyond the wall, for life was so lovely on the hither side. A spreading beech cast shadows on a smooth sward dappled with the sunlight's gold; where a flight of stone steps descended from the terrace before the house, the trickle of a wall-fountain chuckled over a little joke a century old; beyond the short stone pergola, vine-enwreathed, which connected the terrace and the garden wall, began a view of countryside all soft and hazy in the September light. Mutterings filled the air beyond the garden; but here one could almost hear the voices of the gossip gilly-flowers and gay clove pinks massed in crowds at the foot of the terrace. And just because it was the most peaceful place in all the land, the garden wore sadly on the nerves of Tristram's secretary, who was waiting there for his employer. He had seen to it that a work table had been placed under the beech tree; and now appeared Anthony from the house carrying an armchair.

"Set it down under the tree," ordered Blaise, as the man tottered down the steps with his burden.

"Yes, your honor." And the chair was deposited with a prodigious "Whoosh!" of relief, which sent a shudder over the secretary. Wretched manners, these country servants! Actually, the fellow was scratching his head now, like a farm-boy. "I suppose," said Anthony, cocking his watery eye at Blaise, who was now busy ar-

ranging on the table a mass of papers he took from his portfolio, "that this will be about the last day master works here."

"Works?" repeated Blaise with the slightest lift of his fine eyebrows.

"That's what *he* calls it, your honor."

"Why should this be the last day of your master's labors?" Blaise was thinking upon the fact that for the past week or so Tristram had wholly given over his habit of woodland wandering, remaining for hours in the garden. Personally he saw no reason why the poet should not so continue forever. And so, deplorable as is the weakness which impells one to ask advice or news of hirelings (as Blaise believed), he was made genuinely curious by Anthony's observation.

"So we hear below-stairs, sir," quoth Anthony. The secretary shrugged. He loathed even a reference to such base regions. For him, thank God, below-stairs did not exist. But stupid Anthony persisted. "Somebody heard the Lady Alicia remark, sir, that next week we move from Villa Mirador to town."

"The Lady Alicia said that?" echoed the secretary, fixing Anthony with a fishy eye.

"Yes, sir. So I fancies we go, sir."

"God knows, I hope so."

"Me too, sir. I don't think the country's refined." In his enthusiasm, he leaned toward Blaise and whispered —bah, behind his hand, actually like a lout on the stage! Annoying, if anybody should observe the secretary apparently receiving confidences from a serving-man. "Too many vagabonds about, to suit *my* ticket."

In spite of himself, Blaise lent an ear. "Indeed—?"

Anthony edged closer, on the pretext of setting quite straight the chair he had placed behind Tristram's table. "Have you seen him lately, sir?"

"Him?" The secretary was again master of himself. "Master's new friend he fetched in off'n the highroad."

One must be firm with domestic servants, Blaise remembered. Never let them fancy their thoughts or wishes or preferences have the slightest importance or interest. Has a machine any thoughts? "I don't know what you're talking about," said Blaise with decision.

But Anthony lacked training. He persisted. He did not accept his better's reply as final—against all the rules. "That gipsy fellow," he explained. "I've seen him myself once or twice. Hanging about, he was. No' a bad looking chap neither."

"Remember, Anthony, that the Lady Alicia considers him—and all vagabonds—dangerous." He might have said more, or asked more perhaps, save that at the moment Tristram emerged from the house to the broad terrace. With a most elegant skip, the secretary was at the foot of the steps, as his employer started to descend. He gave the impression of a welcoming delegation, all in himself; he sketched a bow. But the older man smiled listlessly. Ignoring the arm which Blaise dutifully extended, he halted at the foot of the steps, surveying with lack-lustre eyes the preparations for his toil which had been so neatly laid out beneath the tree.

"Is everything ready?" he inquired heavily.

"Ready—and waiting," replied the secretary, wondering if Tristram would catch the light reproof.

"Very good then." But still he lingered. "Er—you haven't seen that scoundrelly vagabond today, have you?"

"No, sir. He's a villain."

"Eh—?" The humorous eyes turned on Blaise full for a moment; the smile in them deepened. "If you say so, that settles it. If anybody in this world is a judge of villains, Blaise, you are that person." He crossed the turf, sat down under the tree with a resigned sigh.

"Present my love and compliments to my niece, Anthony," he ordered. "And say to her that—"

"Ahem" hinted Blaise firmly.

But Tristram defied him. "Say to her that I'm expecting her here in the garden."

In giving these instructions, though Blaise did not know it, the poet was strictly obeying his orders. Earlier in the day, his wife had come to him. She wore that air of calm resolution he knew so well. She told him of certain duties she expected him to fulfill. Not that Alicia teased, or bullied, or coaxed, or threatened, or wheedled, or wept, or stormed, or even kissed him under the ear, in order to gain her point. She employed no wiles at all. She merely mentioned in the course of a conversation about flowers and the coming war that certain events were coming to pass at Villa Mirador; and the mere fact that her husband was deeply involved in their successful working out did not enter into Alicia's announcement of her plans at all. I fancy she had considered him most carefully when she was lying awake in her bed, thinking things out; but once her decision had been made, Tristram's assent and assistance were taken for granted. She said she "wanted to talk things over"; but he knew from the start that what his good wife intended was to dictate her orders. And Alicia was fully aware that although her lord would certainly grumble, he would end by accepting her arrangements with the best possible grace, because she was a most superior woman and incapable of error.

She had been clipping dead leaves from the crimson fuchsias drooping indolently from the window boxes; and Tristram was reading the news in the *Gazette*—rumors about tremendous negotiations, rumors about the still absent sovereign, rumors about a pretty woman. Alicia passed behind his chair; he felt her stop; he read

the next two lines of the *Gazette* without obtaining the least idea of what they meant.

"Is there anything a man hates worse than to be interrupted reading his newspaper?" inquired Alicia speculatively. She had a fine voice, flexible and expressive, low and rather appealing when it suited her to pitch it so.

"Nothing," agreed Tristram, reading the two lines again with strained attention.

She laid her arm about his shoulder lightly. "But when a helpless, ignorant woman wants some advice on a matter—oh, so important—?"

He laid down the newspaper instantly. "About Eugenie Louise?" he asked.

Alicia suppressed the smile which rose to her lips at the promptness of this question. It had amused her to note how two weeks after the unknown orphan had descended on Villa Mirador, she had come to occupy a foremost place in Tristram's thoughts. A lesser woman than Alicia might have felt a little sting of annoyance.

"In a way," she answered carelessly. "Possibly. Oswald De Soulter is coming to call this afternoon," replied Alicia casually.

Her husband reddened alarmingly. He swore he wouldn't see De Soulter, that he could not waste his valuable time. Why should he be civil to an imbecile like De Soulter, who happened to possess five or six millions? He'd be dashed if he—

"You won't have to see him," assured Alicia calmly. "But speaking of money," she added indifferently, moving away from her husband's chair, "Blaise has that deed or note, or whatever it is called, which you are going to sign for Rodenheim the banker. You'll be quite sure to attend to that, my dear?"

"Isn't there some other way to raise the money?"

"I'm sure that you, with your wide business expe-

rience can suggest twenty," she sweetly returned. "But for the moment—"

"Twenty five thousand crowns!" exclaimed Tristram. "Half a prince's ransom. And to get them I pledge Villa Mirador. For what?"

"For money, my dear," said Alicia. "*Must* we go all over the question again?" And without waiting for his reply, she admitted that, of course, if it were not for Eugenie Louise, it might not have been necessary to take this measure. At which the poet growled something incomprehensible behind his *Gazette*. Alicia heard his growl, but pretended not to. She continued her story evenly, standing at the window, looking out as if to share her confidences with the summer flowers. Going to the city for the winter—with possibly all the discomforts and high cost of a war to contend with—introducing Eugenie Louise into society (which was a positive duty not to be shirked)—all that meant unusual expenses. But since the child was nineteen, she must have her chance, of course, like other girls.

"Chance for what?" asked the poet. "She's beautiful—good—rides like Diana—swims like a mermaid—and she's getting a real taste for good poetry. Can the city do more than that for a girl? Tell me what you honestly think, Alicia."

"Oh," she smiled with a shake of her head, "I'm one of the old fashioned women, my dear. I let you men do the thinking. And most of the talking. All I do, is—." She smiled again—secretly. "But there are a thousand woman's reasons for taking the child to town for a season, even when things are all awry as they are just now, what with this silly war and all. Eugenie Louise must look about a bit, my dear—meet the right people—have the chance for success all women hope for. Ah, yes, my dear, the city's the only place for a growing girl."

“So—so we go?” he interrupted.

“I rather planned for next week, if your engagements permit. But Oswald De Souter,” she pursued, “will be charmed, I’m sure, to see our little charge for the first time here at Villa Mirador. The garden makes *such* an excellent setting. And I shall see to her clothes personally.”

To Tristram’s inquiry as to why any obese imbecile should want to see his niece, Alicia informed him in the prettiest, most sympathetic way, concerning what amounted to a real romance in Oswald’s life. It appeared that, venturing again to walk in Queen’s Wood, he had been overtaken and passed by a girl who rode like a trooper, begad, at a gallop—oh, a fine sight. A veritable goddess, by Jove!

“A goddess—?” exclaimed Tristram. “Good God!”

“Of course I told him,” said Alicia, “that to you and me our little niece did not resemble a goddess in the least. Goddesses were—well, older, as you might say. More experienced. At any rate, the child dropped her handkerchief—oh, quite by chance, of course, for our darling is anything but artful; Oswald picked it up, recognized the monogram, and asked my permission to return the thing in person. Sweet of him, wasn’t it! And he will arrive,” concluded Alicia, “this afternoon at five. You’ll be busy at your work. I’ll send the child out to visit you; and you will please keep her by you till Oswald appears. No running away, Tristram!” she admonished. “No romancing, Master Poet. She must be in the garden—for I’ve planned everything. Isn’t that spoken like a loving aunt?” she laughed as she finished her instructions. “I’m as sure as I stand here that Oswald wants to marry her.”

“That—that thing?” stammered the poet redly. “Absurd!”

She turned as if stung. But she paused a moment before replying. If this was to be a battle, she would do well to have her forces properly in array. And so her smile became tolerant and tender; she might have so regarded a petulant baby.

“What is—absurd, my love?”

“Anything between Eugenie Louise and that. To begin with, he’s twice her age, and—”

“And ten times richer. Have you any *real* objections?”

“Yes.” But he could not frame them. He stammered. A dull heavy rage choked him; he struggled against unpleasant visions. “I—it’s impossible!” he cried at length. “The lass must marry a boy,” cried Tristram vaguely. “She must fall head over heels in love. Just because she can’t help it. None of this—calculation—advantages—position. Just love. You know what I mean. Sweet and beautiful and—and injudicious.”

“How dear in you, Tristram!” She was as cool as a breeze. “Actually, I believe you’d let your niece fall in love with that vagabond.

To which the poet made no answer at all.

“Strange, is’nt it,” pursued Alicia musingly, “that every little girl should have two heroes?”

This worked better. The poet looked up beneath stormy brows. “How do you mean—*two* heroes?”

“Why,” explained his wife with a laugh, “there’s the lad she’d like to let kiss her, and there’s the man she’d like to have marry her. Frequently they’re quite different persons; but occasionally—”

“I could guess her real hero,” asserted Tristram roundly.

“And I positively know the—the other and more important one. Ah, you cannot deceive the mother instinct, my dear. It’s Oswald.”

“Are you crazy, Alicia?”

"At least," she murmured, "I've never shown the more striking forms of mental disability."

"But the very thought that the child could be happy with that—that—." And he choked again.

"Happy?" She laughed briefly. "Why, the girl would have everything."

"I—I don't mean money, damn it. That's all you seem to think of, Alicia."

This was a challenge. She took it up instantly. She faced him. She brought her artillery into play.

"Look here. If I do think of Oswald De Soulter's money, it's because I'm a sensible woman. I've been poor. You've been poor. There's none too much money to live on this minute. Was it fun being poor? A woman may be as handsome as a Venus and as saintly as the Virgin, but if she's poor, all people say about her is: 'Isn't it a pity she's so hard up!' That's not going to be *our* child's fate, if *I've* got anything to say about it." She stopped and drew breath; she leaned toward her husband as he lay crumpled in his chair. Her hands were clenched at her sides. "And you've got to help me, d'you hear?"

He moved about restlessly. "What can I do?"

"Won't Eugenie Louise do exactly as you tell her? You are law and gospel and everything else to her. You don't appreciate your responsibilities, Tristram."

He studied his wife with an air close to aversion. "One would think," he returned harshly, "that there was some advantage in this—this scheme for *you*."

"There is," she cried crisply. "And for you, too. Oh, don't deny it, my dear. Five or six—how many?—ten millions in the family. Wouldn't that be an excellent thing for a lyric poet, who has to borrow money on Villa Mirador?"

He half rose, then subsided. He brought down his clenched fist ragingly. He was too red in the face by far.

"I—I won't discuss the matter," he shouted softly. "When I want money from Oswald De Souter—"

"You might want it," she riposted viciously. "And in my case, there's the girl to consider. That's the main point. Now, listen."

Checked for an instant, she persisted. She worked hard to recover the slip she had made. Soothingly, she turned the talk to their charge's charm and beauty and sweetness and high spirit. They must take all manner of pains to find a suitable frame and background for so lovely a life. They must consult. Tristram must promise to think carefully of the De Souter project, and not let his own prejudices,—

"You must do the same," he countered.

"Of course!" she agreed warmly. "Any of your own ideas—why, I welcome them, my love. I quite know how fond you are of the child. As I am. We must work together. Today, it's simply that Oswald is coming to call, and—heavens, how our minds run along! Actually," smiled Alicia, as if amused at her own impetuosity, "it's only a question of having the young person on hand when he comes to give her back her handkerchief—ordinary politeness." And in what appeared at least to be high good humor, and before her husband had time to articulate even the first of his ten thousand passionate objections to her idea, Alicia had floated singing out of the room.

"We'll see!" quoth Tristram grimly, resuming his newspaper, resolved to read at length a glimmering of sense into the two troublesome lines. He lingered there a long, long time. And perhaps his head was simmering with some wicked plot or other—which would have been like the old wretch!—when that afternoon he took his seat at the table under the tree, and sent stupid Anthony on his errand to fetch Eugenie Louise.

"But as to business?" suggested Blaise, the patient secretary.

"Man," beamed the poet, "your very looks remind me of it."

The other sidled and smirked. "May I then venture to suggest, dear brother-in-law and master, that if Eugenie Louise might come to you a little later—"

"Incomparable!" He called out to Anthony, who had moved away majestically towards the terrace. "Ask my niece to come in—say, ten minutes. That's plenty of time in which to accomplish a whole day's work, Blaise, if a man practices efficiency. Which reminds me." He glanced about. He wore an odd air of mingled hope and apprehension. Did a tinge of color creep into his cheek, when he caught his secretary's disapproving eye? Did his own eye falter guiltily? "Are you quite sure that rogue of a vagabond's not about the place today?"

"No sir. And a good thing too. Alicia disapproves of him. Strongly. And it's no good having a rough, brutal fellow like that around where Eugenie Louise might see him. He might frighten her."

"What a lot you know!" the poet murmured, sunk in admiration. Then he read two letters, he signed some papers without reading, he pushed the whole mass towards Blaise with a sigh of relief. "There!" he exclaimed with satisfaction. "That's done. I shan't need you any longer, Blaise."

"Pardon me, sir, but here are the accounts of the river farm—the month's household expenses—and the stable." And he placed a new collection of papers before his patron firmly.

"Very interesting," was the latter's comment, as he leaned back and peered up into the tree. "I—I'll look them over. Thank you. That's all, Blaise."

But the other stood his ground. "Sir, in my official

capacity, as your private secretary engaged by your beloved wife, I entreat you to pay attention."

"Oh, I'm busy."

"Sir," returned Blaise, drawing back a step, and presenting a final paper with all the air of a herald who throws down his liege's gage of battle, "this I bring you by special direction. To quote my excellent sister's exact words: 'Stick to him,' said Alicia, 'till Tristram signs it!'"

His employer was looking far away; but as Blaise delivered his speech there crept into the poet's eyes a look of strained intensity. Pretend as he might, he saw nothing at all save the corner of a document heavy with seals which Blaise was sliding gently but inexorably as fate along the table, till it rested just in front of him.

"Alicia said *that*?" asked Tristram in an altered voice.

"And she meant it, too," the other counselled. "This is the mortgage note you are to sign for Rodenheim."

"Ah, I don't like it." The secretary ventured no comment. Demurely, he stood with eyes averted, waiting. "The way that's been chosen to raise this money," the poet explained drawing back. "The banker takes Villa Mirador as his security. If I—if I shouldn't be able to pay him back when this note comes due, he takes Villa Mirador for keeps." He studied the matter with puckered brows. "I don't like it," he repeated with the obstinacy of the mild.

"Alicia," observed Blaise with the worthy persistence of the unpleasant, "desires it so. She—you both, sir—positively require this money, temporarily. My salary depends upon it, partly."

"But Villa Mirador!" exclaimed Tristram, with an explanatory wave of the hand which embraced the lovely garden and the perfect house. "My dear Blaise, it's like

asking a proud young parent to pawn the new baby."

He rose, as if to make a definite end of the scene. He had taken a couple of steps away from the table, when suddenly he halted, and instantly tried to convey the impression that nothing had caught his attention—yonder, amid the vines and pillars of the pergola. He glanced back at Blaise; he saw that worthy with head bent low attentively studying the Rodenheim note. He sent a warning signal to the agile shape of which he felt quite sure he had caught a glimpse—a shape of russet and green, creature of the woods and the highroad. Was that a chuckle of laughter that he heard? He repeated his signal.

Blaise raised his head. "Suppose I report your decision—shall we call it that?—to Alicia," he suggested evenly.

To his vast surprise, the poet instantly agreed.

"A good idea!" cried Tristram heartily. "Go at once, my dear Blaise. As you know, I never take any decision without consulting my wife. Find her. Talk it over with her again. Don't lose a minute."

"Will you be here when I come back?" Blaise asked a bit sourly.

"Indeed I will." What had made him so happy all at once? "Er—my niece is expected any instant, and so—of course I'll be here. Don't hurry back, my boy."

"Very good, sir."

For a considerable time after Blaise had slowly withdrawn into the house, Tristram waited and watched impatiently under his post under the tree; but all was still in the garden save for the twinkling laughter of the little fountain, and the light stirring of the leaves. "Gone again!" he sighed. "And just as matters were beginning to arrange themselves very nicely. Oh, well!"

He turned a displeased and biliary eye on the papers still awaiting his attention. "If I must, I will be good, I suppose. But—"

"Tristram—!"

Was it the wind in the tree that spoke? But just on the heels of his whispered greeting, there appeared again the trim young shape of which the poet had just caught a glimpse. He came from—who knows where? I dare say he had been lurking in the garden from the beginning. His eyes kindled with affection at the sight of the poet pottering at his papers.

"Tristram, old fellow—?"

"I refuse to hear you," said Tristram sturdily, bending to his task. "How dare you interrupt me during business hours?"

"My, but you look bored!" observed the vagabond.

"I'm nothing of the sort. I am absorbingly interested. Do you know how many florins' worth of grain three horses devour in a month? If you were a man of family—"

"Alas!" sighed the intruder. "But I'd like to be," he added hopefully.

"You? Nonsense!"

The other lowered his eyes. "I regret," he murmured, "that you have so little sympathy with my very worthiest ambition. Oh, if I were only respectable!" the youth exclaimed, lifting his hands as if in prayer.

"Why did I ever let you in here at all?" demanded the poet. "Answer me that. You've turned me upside down with your magic, and your stories, and your Lord knows what. Before *you* appeared, vagabonds were never mentioned in this family."

"Lots of people dislike me," answered the other quite candidly. "I scare them too much."

"Who are you, anyhow?"

"A symbol," replied the vagabond politely. "A vague power. I—well, sometimes I start things moving. I'm not quite sure of my name. But," he added hopefully, "I am reasonably honest, in spite of appearances. And I'm young, and hopeful, and ever so much alive, and I fight fairly. And most important of all, I—." But he did not finish; his gesture was recalled, lamely. "Never mind that part," he muttered, turning aside.

"Very promising!" approved the elder with a nod. "Permit me to tell you that you are a most disreputable rascal."

"Fancy that!"

"Yes, sir. You have the word of my wife and excellent secretary for that. But, such is my own senile weakness, I've grown rather fond of you, confound it. Damme, I'm grateful to you, vagabond."

"For nothing, sir."

"Oh, for much," insisted Tristram. "Your stories now! Why, when you tell me tales, you make me believe that I'm young again, and strong, and—. Ah, all illusions, my lad! But I thank you for them none the less. And here you've come again, today!"

"Yes, sir."

"What for? I know." The poet radiated his gratitude, his kindly affection. "You came just to keep an old man company!"

"I—I beg your pardon?"

"I said, to keep an old fellow company."

"Exactly," agreed the vagabond dolefully. He sat down on the turf tailor-fashion. "Jolly, I call it."

Tristram glanced from his queer young friend toward the house, whence his niece was momentarily expected. "I—I appreciate your kindness," he remarked, "but—"

"Oh, I simply love being with you," growled the vagabond dismally.

"All the same, I'd expect a chap like you to spend an afternoon like this quite differently."

"You don't know us, sir." The vagabond shook his head. "This is the age of uplift and efficiency."

"Very true, but I'd suppose you'd be hanging round some girl or other—on a day like this, young man. When I was your age—."

The other made no answer; he sat very still indeed.

"Eh—?" asked the poet.

"Yes, sir," replied the other dutifully. "You're probably right. Hanging round some girl or other. It's the state to which God hath called us."

"Ah, that's better!" exclaimed Tristram warmly. "I wouldn't give a farthing for a lad who wasn't in love every minute. Who is she—some pretty lass in the village? Some dark young gipsy you met on the highway?"

"Gipsy indeed!" cried the youth. He stood up and uncovered. "Sir, she is an angel."

The poet shook his head. "Angel?" he repeated doubtfully. "Go slow, my boy. I married an angel myself. The Recording Angel."

"Perhaps," the vagabond ventured, "your honor will tell me with whom I ought to fall in love. For love, as you were pleased to say, is a necessity to the young and hopeful, such as I am."

"For such as you—at least temporarily," replied Tristram with the air of a physician prescribing remedies, "love, to be of any avail, should be utterly hopeless. To fix you standards. For your own sake—in order to understand the great value of disappointment and wasted sighs and lost time, you should fall in love with the fairest, the sweetest, and the bravest girl in the kingdom."

"Exactly the one I seek," said the beggar. "Who is she? Can you tell me?"

Tristram's hand crashed down on the table indignantly.

For a lyric poet, he displayed a most extraordinary temper. "You don't deserve to be told!" he cried. "But your very ignorance partly excuses you. Who is she indeed? If you linger about this garden long enough, young man, you may possibly enjoy the inestimable privilege of seeing—from a proper distance—my incomparable niece."

"A pleasure!" returned the other very civilly, but, it must be confessed, without what would pass for even a shadow of enthusiasm. In fact, the words and the tone brought the poet to his feet, storming steamily.

"Pleasure!" he echoed, brandishing his arms at the hapless youth, who stood transfixed with terror. "The—the coolness of you! If you were half a man, you'd crawl from hell to here for the chance of even a glimpse of Eugenie Louise! What on earth did you come here for, anyhow?"

"You said, it was to keep your honor company," the vagabond replied with the queerest smile.

"Go to the devil!" shouted Tristram.

And at this point, the sleek and sliding shadow who had emerged from the house during the foregoing exchange, came promptly forward. "Capital, begad!" applauded Blaise warmly. "You've stayed a bit too long, beggar."

"I—I wish him sent away!" commanded Tristram, outraged and resentful, disappointed and hurt. "See to it, Blaise. If I spoke even a word to him, I'd have a stroke. Sneaking, unappreciative, stupid young ass!" And he strode off toward the pergola, blindly, fuming.

The others made no move. If Blaise had even considered laying hold of the rogue, he changed his mind. The vagabond was exceedingly sturdy. And it must be remembered—as Blaise remembered—that a gentleman never uses physical force in any case. One is obeyed by

one's inferiors at a wave of the hand; or if not, one summons help from a faithful retainer. And in all such matters Blaise was a traditionalist.

"You heard what his honor said," he remarked casually to the vagabond, who showed not the least inclination to depart on his own account. "He wishes you to leave. And here his honor's will is law."

For answer, the rogue lifted his eyebrows and shoulders indifferently. "What if I told you," he said, looking at Blaise with a cock of his chin, "that I am above the law?"

What influence, what air, what power went out from the ragged fellow? What had he about him to make men a little afraid? Blaise was equal to most situations; he was experienced in all the ways of quite an extensive world; he was as hard and cold as chilly steel. But now, in the strange and troubling presence of this youth in rags, the secretary lowered his eyes and stammered.

"Some mistake perhaps—I didn't quite understand—I—"

"Learn, man, learn," said the vagabond in the kindest fashion. "There's so much in the world you gentlemen of fashion never heard of—so much you educated people find it most convenient to ignore, deny, condemn as silly. Why," he smiled with a fine and arrogant loftiness, "for aught you know, I may be the vanished prince himself."

"Tristram!" cried Blaise in distress, giving ground a little. "Did you hear—?"

"Yes," cried the poet, still indignant. "He—"

"Calls himself the—"

"I call him the greatest rogue unhung!" proclaimed the poet. "You, our monarch?" he shouted at the vagabond. "A juggling, story-telling mountebank, who hasn't the wit or the feeling or the heart to appreciate the charm of

the most marvelous, the most exquisite, the most tantalizing young woman on earth today. You—royalty? Nonsense! Put him out, Blaise. He should never have been allowed to set foot in Villa Mirador. I'm much disappointed in him. I—." He paused for breath; he had recited this litany of hate with an anxious eye on the house, his voice raised to a pitch which must have carried into the very farthest room, where Alicia might sit enthroned. "As usual," roared the poet, "my wife was right. Out with him!"

The vagabond listened, bowed low, stood at ease, as Blaise went up to his Tristram with some vague idea of urging at least a shade of moderation in his voice, if not in his feelings.

"Suppose," counselled Blaise in his employer's ear, "that you merely ignore the fellow."

"Are you afraid of him?" demanded Tristram, suffering himself none the less to be led a little aside.

"Hardly that," the secretary answered hardily enough, with a swift glance over his shoulder. "But it's always devilish awkward to beat a beggar, only to find afterwards that you've—"

"What?" asked the bard, tartly.

"Punched a prince," replied Blaise, "worth fifty thousand crowns."

"I knew it!" Tristram exclaimed. "You *are* afraid of him!"

Again Blaise laid his chin on his shoulder. A moment before, the vagabond had certainly been standing there, plain to see, his ragged green and russet most offensive. But now, oddly enough—

"Good God!" the secretary whispered. There was his employer wrenching off dead blossoms from the vine which clambered on the pergola. Here he was himself—such as passed for Blaise, at any rate, but as for the vaga-

bond—. "Saints—!" And Blaise as befits a man devout and pious, crossed himself with fervor. He hated his knees for knocking together so loudly; he hemmed loudly and breathed deeply before venturing to trust his voice.

"At any rate," announced Blaise, "the devil's gone."

"Who?"

"The devil."

"Is that how he affects you?" inquired the poet.

"Oh, pray, let's not discuss him," begged Blaise nervously. "There's something about him—. But, as I say, he's vanished for now. Over the wall," he added at a venture. "I fancy I rather scared the fellow—in my quiet way, you know. And—and if you're quite sure you don't need me," he went on, for Blaise felt the necessity of a bracer rather badly. "I'll leave you, sir—to meditation."

Once more peace reigned. Restored in a measure to his usual calm—wearing indeed a most peculiar smile whenever he looked toward the house, or toward the garden wall over which the vagabond was said to have vanished, Tristram sat down at the table and drew toward him the Rodenheim note with its big red seals. Again he read its precise and stony phrases—against twenty five thousand crowns, to be repaid to the banker in six months' time, he pledged Villa Mirador. Oh, well, he could pay! A way would be found. And money certainly was needed, without considering the expense of a possible season in town, on which Alicia had apparently set her heart. Sensible woman, that! He must try to be a better husband. And with all such praiseworthy thoughts singing *Aliciam Laudamus* in his head, he finally affixed an especially handsome signature at the foot of the document.

"That's done!" sighed Tristram. "And now to correct

my verses about Eugenie Louise and the butterfly. This is really important."

So saying, he took a folded paper from his pocket, spread it on the table, held it at arm's length, then in both hands, scanning its contents aloud—not too loud, you know, lest his song might disturb someone in the house, or chill the flowers—an old fashioned poet who felt conscientiously constrained to consider such matters—think of it!—as form, sense, metre, rhyme, figures, subject, tone, atmosphere, sentiment, even in a set of verses ten lines long. For minutes he pondered on a rhyme to "God," and could think of nothing which was not disrespectful, so gave that up for the moment. He passed on to the search for a mate to yoke with "demesne"; but not lighting on any which would do, he discontentedly altered the word to "domain," and proceeded. "Very rotten indeed!" announced Tristram candidly, surveying his patchwork. "Let us destroy that which, as a first class second rate poet, I'm ashamed to have written." And he did so, being one of those craftsmen who will not work at all if they cannot produce work which satisfies the maker. And the product of his skill being thus disposed of—in eight small squares of pencilled paper, the laborer sought a repose in tune with the peace and tranquil beauty of his garden. Twice Tristram nodded. And presently he fell asleep.

Which shows, I think, that not even poets are always wise for hardly had he completely surrendered to slumber before the door of the house was opened, and out came the girl for whom Anthony had been dispatched an hour before, for whom Tristram had been patiently waiting ever since he first came into the garden that perfect afternoon.

You asked me how she looked? For the life of me, I can't tell. But you see her, don't you? What's pretti-

est for a girl to wear when she is nineteen, with glowing eyes, dark curls, a slim round shape, with mischief about her? How would Alicia array her pretty charge to receive an eligible millionaire? What tissues would Eugenie Louise herself select if she half hoped, half doubted that a strange, forbidden forest-roaming, scandalous young outlaw and enchanter might, somewhere about the garden, be lurking for a word with Bob the Bullet?

That she was quite lovely, I feel sure, as she crossed the terrace, and came down the old stone steps.

Sugary little story, isn't it! But it's quite, quite true—!

CHAPTER XIV

BUT not for long did she linger, a serene and dainty figure from old stories, at the foot of the mossy steps. Her first glance round the drowsing garden brought to her face a look wherein pity, horror, dismay, and affection did play like racing clouds and sunshine. She had seen the huddled shape in the armchair beneath the tree.

“The blessed old wretch!” cried Eugenie Louise.

By which she meant, I believe, that her sleeping uncle, while undeniably quaint, could hardly be considered in his present state, either a credit to his family or an ornament to the garden. And so, intending to rouse him instantly from his lapse out of the proprieties, she darted immediately across the intervening stretch of dappled turf.

She was determined, and looked so; but, you will understand, she did not have in mind to use any rough or brutal methods of breaking up the poet’s reverie. His acid wife or sneaking secretary might feel it necessary to bawl at Tristram, or nudge, or shake him, in order to kindle even a spark of respectability; but his favorite niece, desiring merely to help and not reform, would employ the means which, in its own insinuating way, has always awakened in every man a veritable fire.

Moving like thistledown to Tristram’s side, she stooped, she was about to lay her glowing cheek to his, she had almost closed about his neck the cool, soft circlet of her arm, when “Bob—!” she heard somebody whisper just behind her. And for this or some other reason, she deferred her charitable intention.

She stiffened indeed to that which another poet has compared to rose-misted marble. She raised her head, gave a side-wise glance at her unconscious uncle, and very gently drew away her arm from his shoulders. But this did not appear to be for the purpose of answering the voice which had so softly called her name of past adventurous days, forbidden and forgotten, for when at length the girl did raise her eyes, they were all untroubled. She looked about her as if merely viewing—and with the coolest pleasure—the agreeable prospect of the flowers and the sunswept sward.

This, though not ten feet away, come from goodness knows where, stood a trim and woodsy figure in green and russet, who gestured gaily for silence and caution “Bob—!” he breathed again, rapturously. She shrugged her shoulders with a fine indifference. The man begged, and she looked at him incuriously. “Please, please, please—!” he entreated, and—

“Oh, I must not!” broke from the girl stormily, with a tremulous sigh.

“Hrrrmph!” remarked the snoring bard under the tree. The sound served to recall her to her duty. She shivered. Her uncle’s public shame was unendurable. There was every reason for awakening him promptly. But when an agreeable and mysterious youth like Crook-finger stretches out his hands imploringly, and whispers something which is unquestionably a tremendous and delicious secret (though one cannot hear a word he says), what, I ask you, is an orphan child to do?

“Yes—?” faltered Eugenie Louise in another whisper.

“Listen.” And he made as if to draw her a little aside.

“I—you mustn’t,” she answered, also in whispers, as she went with him.

And when she was well withdrawn from the side of her natural protector, the record states that the fast-

sleeping Tristram opened a wicked eye. It twinkled.

"I've been waiting for hours," the vagabond declared eagerly. "All today, after all the other days. I—"

She looked him up and down, coolly. "What brings you here to the garden?"

"I? Here?"

"Yes."

If he was about to tell her the truth, he thought better of it. Without a second's hesitation, he pointed to Tristram. "Oh, a friend of mine."

"What a pity," returned the orphan meditatively, "that my uncle should be asleep, just when you've called. I'll waken him."

"No, for God's sake!"

"No?"

"Wake him, if you wish," rejoined the visitor, turning aside with a shrug.

There was a pause, long enough for them both to feel.

"It's true," sighed the girl presently, "that uncle's terribly in need of rest. Perhaps," she offered, "it would be rather a pity to disturb him, even to talk with you, who came on purpose to see him."

"Bob—!" he cried again, with a thrill of sheer joy in his whisper.

"Not—in these clothes," she stiffly demurred, displaying her delicate silks with her fingertips. I think she was in white and violet, for no other colors, when you consider matters calmly, could have given so sweet a relief to her midsummer midnight beauty. "Besides," she assured him, lowering her eyes as she adjusted her slender girdle. "I really don't know what you're talking about, good youth."

"What—?"

She shook her head slowly. He drew back a pace; the rough gaiety faded from his dark face like November

sunlight, leaving it bleak and shadowed. "Do you mean," he demanded, with a telltale shake in his voice, "that the past is—?"

"The past!" she declared defiantly, looking straight in front of her.

"What—?"

"Yes!" she cried, knitting her brows. "More than that. It—it never happened at all. Nothing happened. By wishing things different, you can easily make them so," she explained, as the youth merely stared in amazement. "It is remarkable what changes can be wrought in the life and character of any girl, if one concentrates. Concentrates. Carefully closing the eyes. At regular hours. My Aunt Alicia, who has studied such things, has taught me a lot. By the mere fact of Being a young lady of birth, education, and refinement," she continued politely, "and—and by wishing to be one, I have eliminated Bob the Bullet completely. Oh, utterly!" she smiled with vast contentment in the achievement.

"Piffle!"

She shuddered at his explosion.

"Liar!" he added with conviction.

She lifted her eyebrows—answer enough.

"Ah, please, please!" begged the vagabond, in the dust once more. "You were so perfectly adorable as an outlaw. So dear—so very dear, littlest. Ah, that day—!"

"I—I don't know what you mean. What day?"

"When you were a villain. A wanderer in the enchanted forest. A boy—my little pal. So plucky and game and tender and good and—"

"You're speaking," interrupted the fine young lady, "of a person who existed only in—"

"My fancy—my imagination?"

"Yes," she nodded miserably. "And—and now I must

go, if you please. Because you want to visit with my uncle."

"I haven't been waiting here for hours to visit with a perfectly strange girl, dressed up like a doll," was the vagrant's astounding answer. It stopped her short. She had been moving away toward the house, outwardly easy and cool and debonair as might be, when his stinging words curled round her like a far-flung noose.

"I—I'm not a—what you said I was.

"You're a lady. God knows why. But—"

"I—I'm not Bob the Bullet, anyhow."

"Something very, very different?"

"Oh, quite!" said Eugenie Louise with a curtsey.

"Very well!" Suddenly his ill humor left him. The sun came out again. As he assented, he clapped his hands as if delighted with some idea which had just come to him. And she watched him—almost fearfully, one would say, breathlessly. Yet eager too. "Not Bob any longer!" he was saying swiftly. "Something different. But not a little prisoner in Villa Mirador either. This life—bah! I'll tell you," he informed her, still in swift whispers, with a glow in his voice and a quiver of entreaty. "You're a princess. Of the Isles. In those clothes, you know. Delicate and elegant. And I—"

"You're a bloodstained pirate!" cried Eugenie Louise.

Believe it or not, those are exactly the words which the orphan employed. Incredible, you say? Impossible, that she should have so suddenly, so completely altered her whole attitude towards the youth? Ah, that shows how sadly we have failed in our endeavor to indicate to our patient readers just who the youth in green and russet was. But it would take too much time—nor have we the patience—to explain him in fuller detail just at this critical moment. Better far to take another look at Eugenie Louise as she stands there, her smile flashing,

her whole being kindled suddenly as with an inner flame, tense and springy, greatly daring and glad to dare anything.

"Begin!" she commanded, with an anxious look toward her uncle.

"Ha—!" he growled most reassuringly. He caught her by the slender wrist. His mien and swagger were those of all of Blackbeard's sons. "Come away, proud girl! Come, till I—"

"Yes—yes!" she cried delightedly. "I mean—no. No, never!" she sent back at him through her white teeth, in all the arrogant pride of race and sex. "Unhand me, wretch, this instant!"

"Not I, by the Mass!" He twitched her closer to him; he lurched forward, dragging her. One would swear that yonder, down on the firelit beach, his boat with its desperate, drunken crew was waiting. Yonder again, lifting to the lazy swell, his bloody, handsome schooner lurked. His victim sank to her knees. Two accusing grass stains appeared to ornament the front of her dress. She rose to her feet again, struggling fiercely, though limp with terror at her prospective fate. And indeed a real pang of dismay made her heart beat fast when—

"Here, what's going on?" broke from the poet under the tree, as the struggling, whispering pair crashed past his table.

In a flash they separated. And "Uncle—!" was all that the pirate's victim had to say.

"What is this—rioting?" demanded Tristram. "I'm roused from a deep study of—of geometry, begad, to see my beloved niece struggling—and giggling—with a rascal I've just had turned out of Villa Mirador forever. Explain yourself, baggage.

"We—we were pretending," explained the baggage lucidly. "He's a pirate."

“What?”

The vagabond broke in with enthusiasm. “She is a princess.”

“And he’d almost captured me!” added Eugenie Louise with joy. “Oh, uncle, do go to sleep again!”

“I looted a city on the Spanish Main,” declaimed the romancer, and somehow he evoked the picture then and there before the eyes of the old man in the arm chair, splendidly. The color, the movement, the scents of life—distant scenes of struggle and adventure and lust and sacrifice. He had done this a hundred times already for the gentle, faded poet drowsing in his chair; now again he caught him up and carried him to lands once dreamed of, to a life once fancied possible. “I stalked the streets in blood and treasure. The Governor’s daughter—”

“Dolores!” prompted Eugenie Louise, with both hands on her beating heart.

“From her latticed window she looked down on me, the outlaw *conquistador*—”

“And her brave young heart went wild and rebel!” cried the poet’s niece.

“Stuff and nonsense!” answered the poet testily.

“But it is!” insisted Eugenie Louise. “It’s beating like anything this minute. Go on, pirate.”

“My empress!” cried Blackbeard hoarsely, drawing his conquest to his heart. “Away we go—to my haunts on Treasure Island.”

“And I’ll steer the ship,” the governor’s daughter decided. “Hurry, Captain Kidd!”

“I venture to think,” observed Tristram critically, as the others paused for a second, “that your Aunt Alicia would not approve. Steering a pirate ship across the Spanish Main is not ordinarily considered quite suitable work for a refined—”

“Hoots!” exclaimed Miss Buchanan, recalling some

outlandish native cry of her Scottish parent's now happily dead. "Please, uncle—!" she added plaintively.

And now it was the vagabond who flung himself at Tristram's feet. Surely, surely Tristram must understand. Surely he must know why the vagabond had come to Villa Mirador, why day and night he hung about the place. Just to see her—just to know that he was near her—just to live in the hope of a word or a smile from her who was everything that God ever contrived most adorable and exquisite and—

"Out of the question!" returned Tristram shortly. "Absurd—presumptuous—impossible! My niece and a beggar? My niece and—you?"

"Yes!" cried Crookfinger hardily.

"But she—she doesn't—how is this, my dear?" asked Tristram of somebody in violet and white, who stood by, very busy not listening. "Answer me!"

"He's—he's awfully respectable, for a vagabond," she replied, soft lips a-tremble. "He does amuse me. He's good—to pretend with. And, oh, uncle, it isn't any fun, being a lady *all* the time."

"You see?" put in the pirate hotly. "Just for an hour—just for a moment, Tristram, let me be with her."

But the stern old man was obdurate. He was shocked and surprised and amazed. He told the vagabond roundly that he was not a suitable person to have round Villa Mirador at all, let alone suffering him to talk freely with a young lady of the very highest society. "Pirates?" repeated the poet fiercely. "Captive princesses? Preposterous! I suppose," he mocked, "that you'd like to take a run in the park together, pretending that you were in the—the Amazon jungle, or crossing the Sahara, or lost in the trackless prairies of America!"

The guilty pair consulted each other with a glance, sheepishly. Crookfinger murmured some farrago about

the Islands of the Seas. To which his partner in infamy added the one word "Martinique!"

"Exactly!" commented Tristram with relish. "Now pay me strict attention." And to enforce his order, he bade the twain take a position just in front of him, side by side. "Hold hands," he added brusquely. "That will help you to concentrate on what I am about to say."

With this preamble he laid down the law at considerable length. He punctuated his discourse with many references to rogues, to Alicia, to graceless, headstrong girls, to duty, to prowling vagabonds, to the functions of guardianship, and to Martinique. And he concluded his oration by proclaiming as fundamental the fact that he had promised his wife that Eugenie Louise should pass the afternoon in his company, in the garden which she was then adorning. "Though the impression you give," said the poet, dwelling on the slim and dainty shape of violet and white, "is rather that of a spring than a summer flower. However—" He paused and drew a long breath. "The point of all this being that you stay here—the vagabond returns whence he came—and I keep a careful eye upon you both. For the moment," stated Tristram with relish, "I am a duenna."

"You are shockingly cruel," sighed his niece dolefully, turning away. She did not go far, because the other criminal still kept fast hold of her hand.

"The duty of a duenna," answered Tristram, eyeing the vagabond steadily, "is to guard the young and sprightly against the more common indiscretions of youth, sex, and temperament. The duenna's catlike vigilance and devotion to duty, however, is frequently eluded. It is set at naught by ardent swains—by any lad," cried Tristram, pounding on the table, "with blood in his veins. Good God! With a ladder handy, and Martinique only a stone's throw the other side of the wall? In my day,"

said the poet, rising from the table, "it only needed a moment, when the duenna's back was turned—"

"Hush!" signalled the pirate, as Tristram moved away, his hands clasped behind him. Ready—?"

"But nowadays," the poet grumbled, continuing his march, which led him directly away from where the two young people were standing), "such is the stupidity of the times, that I can be gone for a full ten minutes, and find," he cried indignantly, looking round at the two still motionless figures, "that the lass and the lad are standing exactly where I left them. Like two dummies talking political economy!" He spread his arms wide and looked up into the heaven. "When they might have slipped away to Martinique!" he lamented, "and returned—in ten minutes—without the duenna being one bit the wiser!" And so saying, he took himself off, fuming, to disappear beyond the vine-wreathed pergola.

"Bob!" exclaimed Crookfinger.

"Ten minutes!" she answered, clapping her hands.

"It won't be exactly a runaway," he demurred, "but—"

"Life," observed Miss Buchanan, as they sped towards the ladder, "has taught me to be content, old boy, with the Next-Best-Thing. Over with you, honest pirate, and catch me when I jump."

Once up on the wall, she leaned down to the pirate confidently, resting her hands on his shoulders, as sturdily he braced himself. Between his own hands he took her supple waist. A little leap, a swing of his mighty arms, and she alighted on the leaf-carpeted floor of the woodland. Her eyes were shining; her velvety lips were parted with the excitement of their new adventure; a radiant color was high in her cheeks.

"Forward to Martinique!" he cried, releasing her.

"But I must be back in ten minutes," spoke the girl within her.

"Oh, no."

"Positively."

"But I've so much to say to you," he pleaded.

It was as though a shadow had come suddenly over the sunshine of her gaiety. She did not look at him. She stopped to shake her pretty clothes into something like perfect order, she settled the tilt of the wide garden hat, before she followed at his side along a wood-path between the ancient beeches of the park. He told her extravagantly of his joy at having her with him again; but she said not a single word till they came to a fallen tree lying by the side of their road. Here he halted. She studied the palm of her hand.

"I must go back," she murmured vaguely. "They'll miss me."

"Afraid?" he taunted.

"I was very good to come at all," she reminded him severely. She sat down on the fallen log, spreading her flowing skirts so wide on either side that he was forced to camp at a distance. She folded her hands in her lap demurely. "My only reason for taking this walk with you," said Eugenie Louise, "is that I shall be going to town very soon now for the winter. And so I wanted—"

"Tell me," he begged, as she faltered.

"I don't know. Nothing very much."

He sank to his knees in front of her, sitting on his heels. "Tell me this much," he asked her. "You—you're not sorry that once you spent a day with—"

"Oh, that was capital fun," she answered, kindling a little. "That was the sort of thing that happens once in a life-time. Such adventures—!"

"You'll forget me," he protested miserably.

"No, vagabond."

"If you knew who I really am—"

"Hush!" she warned him quickly. "I think of you—

whenever I have time—as just Crookfinger. That's who you are. Who you must be, always. The boy who lived in the little house in Queen's Wood. The unknown boy. Who—who was so good to me. You can never, never be anything else."

"Not a soldier?" he begged.

She shivered. "Of course, if you must," she answered steadily. "Like every man, if—"

"And what are you to me?" he asked her, rising to his feet. She too stood up. Vaguely she looked back along the green and golden path they had been following. Her fingers were knitted closely. Then, abruptly, she laid her hand on his arm, as if in warning.

"What is it?"

"Didn't you see him?"

"No. Where?"

"Yonder, at the end of the wood-road. A rider in a blue uniform. Black horse. He crossed the path and went into the woods."

"Yes—?"

"It was a gendarme," said Eugenie Louise, in a lowered voice.

"And then—?"

"I keep fancying things."

"Such as—?"

"That horseman—here in the woods—and you," she answered, with a quick little smile which had small mirth in it. "I'm ever so glad he came—on the trail of something, as it were, because it helps me to believe you're really what you've said you were. A villain. A desperado. A genial outlaw. An—"

"To me," the youth replied, "you can never be anything but Bob the Bullet."

"Or—Dolores?" she hinted, with a sidelong smile,

provoking and demure. "Like this," she added quickly, facing him before he could frame a proper answer to her smile. "As you see me today—pretending. A captive princess of make-believe. That's all, Crookfinger. Just make-believe." And she turned away toward the ancient, beautiful house where people of the real world were waiting for her.

"Not yet!" the vagabond pleaded. "You didn't hear what I had to say. I—"

"Ah, but I've said it for you," she reminded him, elusive.

"No." He caught her by the hand. He stopped her.

"I—I mustn't," whispered Eugenie Louise, lowering her eyes as she yielded to an entreaty which was none the less eloquent for being unspoken. "But I can't imagine what you want to say to me, Crookfinger."

"Three words."

What was there in that which made her restless, made her gently draw away from him? "Please let me go, Crooky," she begged. And then he took her two hands. He held her square in front of him.

"I love you," he answered. "I want you. I can't live without you. From the first minute I saw you, there by the side of the brook, I loved you. I—dearest!" cried Crookfinger. That made thirty words in all; but the ring of his voice, and the passion in his heart of youth and fire would have spoken for the man with no words said at all. "Dearest!" he cried again, stammeringly. "You must hear me! All I have I'll give you—all the best of me—hopes and dreams and the life of me, if only—"

"How could we?" she murmured. "You—"

"Forget these rags!" he cried hotly, with a gesture at his dirty russet jacket. "This disguise—this travesty—"

"You're not real then?"

She shrank back from him, wide-eyed. He cursed his unlucky star for what he had said.

"Crookfinger—yes—I swear it. Always that for you, Bob the Bullet, gamest of little outlaws. But I'm more than that. I—"

"There's nothing more," she answered with a sigh.

"You'd listen then to—?"

There was no answer. Her head was bent. Beneath her soft silks rose and fell her rounded, delicate breast.

"I've sought the kingdom over for you," he cried, close to her, hungry for her. "For—for the girl of my hopes. For you. Ah, tell me!" he begged passionately. "The time's so desperately short. Tell me—I can hope, my dearest. That perhaps you—"

Still she was silent. She did not stir. For an instant you would have thought she was at prayer, so still and trembling stood she.

But presently the man in blue who, with breathless caution had crept up in the last few minutes to watch the twain from the shelter of the leafy covert, saw what made his honest heart go warm with pleasure. For, as her lover's lithe and muscled arm went round her, the girl leaned back her head, and to her lover—

"Take me," said Eugenie Louise, the warm lips barely moving. She had gone very pale. There was a transfigured look on her lovely face—a new look of dignity and submission and trust and consecration. Her eyes burned like lights before a sanctuary, with a glow all mystical and tender. "For always," she whispered. "To the end of the world with you, dear Crookfinger."

He drew her closer unresisting. She answered to his kiss with all her young heart speaking for her on her lips, eloquent though silent as two rose leaves. For long he held her in the magic circle of his arms. Then he looked

up. He dropped his forehead on her shoulder; his eyes closed as if a little prayer went from him. Then slowly he released her, only to draw her back again.

“Mine!” he murmured thrillingly.

“I—I promise you,” she answered. “Everything, Crookfinger.”

“And nothing in all the world shall ever come between us,” the man made oath, as reverently he cherished her.

CHAPTER XV

THE shadow of the sun-dial in the garden had travelled so little that it marked the lapse of hardly any time at all after Captain Kidd and his captive had disappeared, before a cool and cultured woman's voice was heard, calling first for the runaway, and then, more acidly, for her recent guardian.

"I cannot understand where the child can be," said Alicia, accepting the fat hand of De Soulter to be assisted down the steps from the terrace. She spoke very lightly—there was even a caressing note of affection in her voice, as again she summoned her absent charge. But her heart was heavy; and her righteous indignation had begun to simmer. She had planned matters so carefully! De Soulter had arrived panting with excitement, rehearsing anew his adventure of finding the dropped handkerchief. The garden setting was perfect; the girl had looked perfection. And now a blank—an entrance *mangué*—an effect quite ruined.

"She's not here after all?" complained De Soulter, peering about.

"I'm sure she hasn't gone far," returned Alicia sweetly. "Our little girl is such a home-body." But the situation was surely annoying, had not Tristram just then appeared, coming from the upper end of the garden. He was in a great hurry. But as he caught sight of Alicia and her guest, he stopped short. He actually had turned, as if to beat a retreat, when his wife called to him, asking if he had seen Eugenie Louise.

He repeated the question. "Good afternoon, De Soul-

ter," he added hastily. "Eugenie Louise?" he said again helplessly. "Why, she *was* here."

"So I had supposed," Alicia reminded him frigidly.

"I—I'll go look for her."

"Pray don't trouble on my account," the visitor protested.

"I'm not," replied the poet earnestly. "I'm troubled on my own account. Sir—" And he bowed to De Soulter ceremoniously. "My sweet!" he threw as a sop to Alicia (who shuddered). And hastily but with dignity, avoiding any further questions, he made good his retreat to the comparative safety of the house. "Now may the Lord have mercy upon me!" prayed Tristram as he peeped through a window at the pair in the garden, "I'm lost forever, and so is that unhappy child."

Rallying her forces, Alicia did the best she could. She talked about De Soulter, which always pleases the De Soulters of this world; she talked of his travels, his house, his amatory conquests, his plans for the winter. She noted for future reference that, if war was declared, he fancied he might spend the winter in the country after all. For five minutes she eased him along, fearful every instant that the bird might take wing. And then, her heart nigh breaking, she rose to her feet.

Oswald raised his hand, as if for silence. "Do you know," he observed mysteriously, "that I fancied I heard somebody whispering?" He pointed to the wall, where the ladder stood. "Over yonder. Two voices. You don't believe—?"

"Impossible!" answered Alicia with decision.

"But the whispers sounded—"

"There's nobody there now," said his hostess, in the midst of a deathly silence. "And in any case, it could not be my niece. Ah no, my dear Oswald, she probably

is busy among the flowers at the other side of the house. I can send for her, unless—”

“Exactly!” he agreed, seizing her thought very deftly. “Let us go in search of her. It will be amusing. Better still,” he added, as a brilliant idea flashed to him, “do you go one way, and I’ll go another. We will both search for the lovely truant.” And he beamed.

“But you wouldn’t know her,” she demurred a bit doubtfully. “You’ve never really seen my niece.”

“Ho, ho!” laughed Oswald, who was really a most amiable person, you must agree. “I’d know my goddess anywhere.”

Quite at the end of her resources, and feeling perhaps the necessity of a moment’s solitude for further reflection, Alicia consented. They separated, agreeing to return to the garden if a tour of the house should yield no results.

“Beating the covert, by Jove!” exclaimed Oswald with relish, who had once gone to a hunt meet in England.

Meanwhile, the lovers had come to the end of a journey as through roses and the glory of sunrise. They reached the garden wall, and peeped over. The coast was clear, and in a trice the girl was once more at the top of the ladder.

She looked down at the man on the other side, just below her. “You’ll not forget?” she murmured. “It may be so long before we—”

He leaned up to her. With his two brown hands he covered the hand she rested on the top of the wall. His lips were at her ear. “Call to me!” he told her fervently, his voice uncertain from very eagerness. “Call to me, and I’ll come to you from the ends of the earth.”

“I wouldn’t know how, Crookfinger.”

“Think of me,” he bade her. “That’s all. I’ll hear you. I’ll be waiting for a message every hour, Bob,

wherever I am. Think of me. Will that be hard?"

Her head dropped to her breast. "Not too hard, Crookfinger," whispered Bob the Bullet. Then she looked up again. And because her heart beat swiftly with sudden love, perhaps because some silly tears were in her eyes, she raised her lips to lips which asked for hers, and took them. "Good bye!" she whispered. And once more he kissed her, blindly. And again—no, not quite, for just then a door in the house opened, and Crookfinger had just time to drop down out of sight. And there remained Eugenie Louise, at the top of the ladder, with her face quite buried in the soft fold of her elbow, as Oswald advanced in majesty.

She looked up hastily, on hearing the important creak of his varnished hessians. She sat quite still while you could count up to four. In that space she considered how to descend from a shaky ladder without sacrifice of either womanly charm or maidenly modesty; she rehearsed twenty different explanations of her presence on that dizzy height. She remembered, as became a girl of deeply religious nature and sound training, to thank her kindly saints that here was not Aunt Alicia, but a mere fat man, master of Queen's Wood. Then, deciding perhaps unwisely that she was called on to come down, she faced to the front with a soft rustle of silk, and reached down her right foot, feeling for a lower rung, holding on tight the while to the sides of the ladder. She did not look at Oswald at all. Another groping step, and a look of horror and dismay darkened the glow of her eyes. An arresting tug, an ominous rip, a feeling as of a heavy hand which held her prisoner struck Eugenie Louise with a horror easily understood. A nail—a malicious, damned, rusty, hidden nail-head—had caught in some inner, under fold of her best garments. And there on the ladder she hung suspended, painfully aware of exposing to the ad-

miration of a staring stranger twin stretches of lovely, intimate curves ensheathed in sleek white silk.

“Damn!” quoth Eugenie Louise. And she added plaintively to Oswald who was hastily adjusting his eye-glass, “I wish to heaven you’d run away.”

“But what are you doing on that ladder?”

She made what shift she could to retrace the two fatal steps, succeeded, and sat down again. She folded her hands in her lap. “Resting,” announced Eugenie Louise.

“And how long—?”

“Until you walk to the upper end of the garden, and thoroughly examine the rarer specimens of bloom, I shall stay exactly where I am. I must,” she said, painfully aware of the clutch of the nail.

The man gobbled something about helping her; but as she declined his assistance with perfect composure, he bowed with all the elegance at his command, and civilly turned his broad back. “Good man!” she called gratefully; and then, after a hasty search, some breathless fingerling, and one impatient tug, she released herself, recklessly gathered her skirts, and simplified life by jumping lightly to the turf below. “Now you can turn round,” she allowed in the kindest way. “What can I do for your honor?” she asked with a little curtsey.

“I’m searching for Miss Eugenie Louise Buchanan.”

She laughed disdainfully. “You wouldn’t like her, if you did find her. No,” the girl insisted, as Oswald uttered sounds of protest, “she too much resembles me to be popular with an—an oldish gentleman like yourself.”

“Resembles—you?” he boomed resentfully, at this bit of impertinence. “A romp?” exclaimed Oswald in scorn, as she pirouetted past him. “What do you know about her, anyhow?”

“Everything.” She swept him another profound

curtsey. "And nothing that's good. In the strictest confidence," she sent at him in a stage whisper behind her hand, "Eugenie Louise Buchanan is a wretch."

And how much more of the same sort she might have dished out to the scandalized De Soulter, before she escaped into the house, I cannot tell. But luckily the situation was altered. Perplexed and very hot, Alicia returned to the garden from a search which had been quite in vain. She returned to behold a stout gentleman, very flustered and red in the face, trying to ignore a hoydenish girl much too well dressed for her station, who was laughing boisterously, actually holding her sides, at some witless joke of her own coining.

"Farewell!" cried the lass, turning toward the house. "Don't tire yourself waiting for her." And then she caught sight of what she thought was a thunder cloud swooping down on the garden. "It's all over," sighed the girl, as she halted and raised her two hands in resignation. "And may the Lord be merciful to me, a sinner."

"What does this mean?" inquired Alicia tremulously.

"Madame," reported the righteously indignant master of Queen's Wood, "this young jade is laughing at me. I found her descending that ladder. I asked her, had she seen your charming niece. And she began to speak of that young lady, and of myself, with the utmost disrespect. With levity, madame, levity."

What would you have done in Alicia's case? For long she had planned; every day for a week she had recast and perfected her arrangements for this meeting. She saw herself within an ace of marrying off her troublesome charge to perfectly enormous advantage—her duty fulfilled, her peace restored, everything happy. And now this *contretemps*! And now this malicious freak of fate, which could not possibly have been foreseen, or its consequences repaired. Even now De Soulter was smooth-

ing his beaver and plainly preparing his departure. And she detected an elf of a smile dancing across her niece's mournful countenance. It was tragic. Alicia's head swam. She pressed her hand to her brow, another against her throbbing heart.

"Pray excuse her!" she murmured to Oswald. "And your hair's coming down!" she moaned at her niece accusingly. "And he spoke of you as a goddess—!"

"Of—of this person?" asked Oswald in amazement.

"A goddess?" gasped the culprit delightedly. "But I'm not one, really. I—"

"Eugenie Louise!" her aunt trumpeted, in a tone which damped all frivolity like a shower the dancing dust.

"That *does* sound like a scolding!"

Alicia managed a smile. "Enlightened parents, or guardians, never scold," she cooed. "Scolding is quite out of date." She slipped her lean arm through the girl's in the fashion of an intimate comrade. "We try to develop our children's personality—to suggest a point of view—to indicate a line of conduct. (Stand still, you little devil!) Which will lead our darlings to happiness."

"Happiness!" breathed Eugenie Louise.

"I wander," said her aunt, nodding at the astonished visitor, "Let me have the pleasure, my sweet, of presenting—"

"Not Oswald De Souter!" interrupted the wretch, as if just awakened to this tremendous fact. "Not," she added with a smile which betrayed an inward joy, "the master of Queen's Wood! Plainly, I should have behaved otherwise. I abase myself. I—I'm sorry to cause pain. And so, dear aunt, with your permission, I'll rejoin Uncle Tristram."

"Adorable!" broke from Oswald unexpectedly.

"Generous man!" exclaimed Alicia, moved to her depths. "My precious wicked one, I request that you

stay here, and efface your first impression. What is it, Anthony?" she asked of the serving-man who came from the house.

"The master's love, ma'am, and he wants to know if it's safe for him to come out."

"Tell him—that I'm coming in," she answered, moving, toward the terrace. She paused at the steps, outwardly serene again. "I'll leave you a moment, to get better acquainted. Remember, my dear!" she added darkly.

"Remember what, Aunt Alicia?"

"Just—remember!" warned the older lady, as she took herself away.

But Alicia need not have worried. Only for a moment did her niece yield to what was an irresistible temptation.

"Sir!" she murmured, eyes cast down.

"Fairy!" broke from the enraptured one, who followed as she crossed to a seat under the tree. "This—this is a privilege indeed. A *tête-à-tête* with a young lady who—"

"Who combines in her own person," interrupted the young lady in question softly but fervently, "the engaging wildness of the savage, the grace of the court, and the beauty of the morning glory."

"Good God!" Oswald ejaculated. "I—"

"That is what you intended to say, I'm positive. It sounds exactly like you. I'll never forget it. I only wish that I deserved such honeyed flattery."

But in the next moment she had bewitched him. In a flash she had changed her tone. Lives there a creature in this imperfect world so near perfection in behavior as the girl who has just won her heart's desire? Happy, cool, serene, she is so kind towards those not so blessed as herself; she pitied all men for their inferiority to the

one man; inaccessible, she is gracious to those who aspire hopelessly.

It was the work of a minute to make Oswald regret that he had allowed himself to be vexed by what seemed her rudeness. She apologized so prettily—like a little girl who has been naughty—that his heart glowed with delight as he forgave her.

She extended a firm, cool hand; but, as he stooped gallantly to kiss it, she drew it gently away. "Not like that," she demurred. "Friendly fashion. Straight out. Will you?" And they exchanged an honest hand-shake which surprised him. He could not recall having ever shaken hands with a girl before; he liked the experience tremendously. She sat watching him with serious eyes as he went through his set oration about having come to return her lost handkerchief; she exclaimed happily over the tiny square of monogrammed muslin—such a favorite handkerchief—she had wept over its loss, positively she had—she could weep for joy now that it was recovered—how thoughtful of Mr. De Souter to trouble to bring it back! Did he often walk in Queen's Wood? How beautiful it was under the trees!

"When did you first see the place?" he inquired.

Whereat his pretty hostess gravely considered, and replied that she could not quite recall either the date or the circumstances. "But Uncle Tristram takes me there occasionally," she made haste to add. What was she smiling about in that secret fashion?

"I'm very glad that you don't go to Queen's Wood on foot alone," said Oswald gravely. "I've been obliged to give up my own promenades across that part of my property." He nodded portentously. "Very dangerous times we live in, my dear young lady."

"Even for you?" she asked admiringly.

"Yes."

"Pray, pray, continue," she entreated prettily, as Oswald stopped short, "for I'm positive that you have a story to tell me."

"Well," he conceded, "I did have a rather—er—disturbing experience in Queen's Wood less than a month ago. You haven't heard of it?"

She shook her head.

"God bless my soul, how perfectly extraordinary!" And so Oswald forthwith recounted for her enlightenment his adventure with the two young ruffians, in his best narrative manner. It was thrilling, I assure you. When he had finished, he apologized for assailing her delicate ears with such a brutal, bloody tale.

"They were wretches indeed," she agreed with generous warmth. "But I suppose you did present an almost irresistible temptation."

"I? A temptation?" He beamed delightedly. Nobody had ever called him that before.

"Can you doubt it?" she urged. "If I were a bandit—"

"Now heaven forbid such a fancy!" he cried. "Truly, you say the quaintest, most fascinating things! I—God bless my soul," exclaimed Oswald briskly, "I believe you're capable of almost anything!"

"That is what Aunt Alicia believes, too."

"Oh, but I didn't mean anything like that. I only meant—"

"Pray don't trouble to explain," she begged, coming to his rescue, entrancing him with her mysterious, flashing smile. "We understand one another so perfectly, dear Mr. De Soulter."

And so on, and so on. For half an hour. Until there appeared Anthony, announcing that Mr. De Soulter's carriage was at the door, and behind him Alicia, with all traces of her recent sorrow smoothed away. And there followed another five minutes of the politest ex-

changes you can possibly fancy, for a gallant bachelor was entreating two ladies to honor him with their company on a drive to his own fine house, where he would crave the further honor of giving them tea; and the two ladies, after protesting that he was really far too kind, confessed that a drive and tea would fill to the brim their respective cups of happiness.

"It isn't possible!" Alicia kept saying to herself, as she marked her neice's admirable conduct. "Pray God it lasts!" she ejaculated fervently. "I wonder if the child actually fancies the man at all," she ventured, hoping greatly, as slowly the three of them strolled towards the smartly turned out carriage which waited in the drive.

CHAPTER XVI

BUT we are forgetting Tristram's excellent secretary, whom we left retreating from the garden in flustered disorder.

For the moment he was quite out of temper, because he was at a loss to know what to do. But after a little, heartened by long application to one of the tall decanters which gleamed on the sideboard, and further refreshed by a rest in the panelled dining room—so cool and dark after the confusing riot of sun and flowers in the garden, Blaise so far recovered that he could at least begin to think.

From the beginning, he had felt with regard to the vagabond an uneasiness, a suspicion, a dislike, the more bitter and black from being hard to define. Confound the fellow! His bearing (which was undeniably distinguished), his whimsical smile, his fine eyes and brow, the very breadth and carriage of his shoulders, were traits which just for their singular charm furnished reasons why any honest man should dislike the intruder at Villa Mirador. And the rogue had been insolent; he had out-faced the secretary in Tristram's presence. Alicia despised him as a gipsy runagate. And today Tristram himself was so vexed at his odd friend, that he would doubtless reward a faithful secretary who obeyed his petulant order to send the rascal packing.

“Confound the brute!” voted Blaise the virtuous. “Let's get rid of him!”

So far, so good. But certain important considerations made him hesitate over a choice of methods. What if by some awkward chance, it should transpire that after all

they had been harboring at Villa Mirador no less a person than their sovereign prince? Just now, in the garden, Blaise had felt a most horrid certainty that this was the case. Something about the fellow—! The look of him as he gave an order. But how to prove this suspicion? What to do, in order to force the fugitive young monarch to acknowledge his identity—surrender good-humoredly—confess with a laugh that the jig was up—and return him safe and sound to his distracted capital? To accomplish this meant that Blaise would win a reward of fifty thousand crowns. But it was devilish dangerous reflected that prudent person, to interfere with either a prince's pleasures or a workingman's whims. What was the reward in comparison with incurring forever the displeasure of a striking sovereign, who, on being apprehended and sent back to work, thoroughly out of temper could make or ruin the Blaises of the land at will. How about abetting him in his whimsical escapade—winning the friendship of the vagabond? But he might prove to be a mere gipsy after all.

"Blind me if I know what to do!" groaned the secretary. On only one point was he resolved. He would play a lone hand. If there was any credit or profit to be got by disposing of this troublesome prince—beggar—what-not—Blaise determined wisely that he alone was going to win it. And he must set about the work at once. Action of any sort—and at once.

Feeling that a turn on horseback might quicken his wits, he sent word to the stables to saddle the horse which Tristram had assigned to his use, and went to his room to change into riding clothes. Ten minutes later, he was pacing down the driveway to the gates, and presently, thankful that he had not met a soul to interrupt him with greetings or questions, Blaise reached the highroad.

"Which way, my friend?" he inquired of his patient,

aged mount. "You may take me to the devil, for all I care."

And so, the horse, to oblige like all of us when it costs nothing, turned toward the town. At this warm afternoon hour, there was nobody about save distant blue or white figures at work in the fields. The air was heavy. Misted with the white dust of the road, the trees were motionless. Away yonder, at the end of a long avenue bordered with lindens showed the white face of the Gerouville chateau, shuttered against the sunshine. Blaise meditated paying Marcelle a call—the woman who sent such fancies spinning through a man's head with her sidelong, conspiring look, her secret smile, her restless, jewelled hands. But he dismissed his inclination as mere weakness. He had work to do.

"But how?" cried Blaise, fidgeting in his hot saddle. He could have cried aloud from sheer vexation. "Where to take hold of this thing?"

"Halt!" commanded a heavy voice. "I beg your honor's pardon, but—halt!"

Too surprised to disobey the summons, Blaise reined in his mount. From the far side of one of the little stone wayside huts where the road menders kept their tools, there surged into sight a stalwart figure in blue and scarlet, belt gleaming with pipeclay. Over his arm hung his horse's bridle, as the good beast grazed luxuriously.

"Sir," demanded this apparition reproachfully, "does my appearance recall anything definite to your mind?"

It was with that sinking about the heart which was common to all the wicked of the land that Blaise recognized the uniform of the Royal Rurals; but to gain time he shook his head.

"Nothing," he answered blankly.

"Try any of the approved memory systems," urged the trooper. "Their sponsors assert that each is infal-

lible. Now!" And he beat time with his forefinger, "Gendarme—highroad—dust—mud—rain—"

"But that leads me straight to spring wild flowers," complained Blaise, opening his eyes.

"Ha! Exactly! Hold that! Wildflowers—beauty—perfume—charm—woman—now you've got it!" cried the trooper. "Woman—fickle—fortune—gambling—a bet—and you recall that you owe Tylendonck of the Royal Rurals ten clinking crowns." He extended a mighty hand. "Pay up. I venture to observe that the forty eight hours allowed between gentlemen of honor has been stretched to longer than I should have expected, sir," said Tylendonck with dignified reproach, and the weighty hand closed on Blaise's bridle. "Months have passed since we backed our opinions about a certain heiress's clothes, and—"

A smart curricle appeared round a turn in the road. The postillion wore a livery which Blaise recognized as that of De Soulter. "Let go!" he hissed at Tylendonck, cold with dread at being seen by any of his acquaintances in this none too agreeable situation. "Let go, you fool, and I'll pay you anything."

"I should be indeed a fool, to do anything of the sort," returned the gendarme simply. "For once your honor was clear, I should have to whistle for my poor ten crowns."

The curricle rocked past. With infinite relief, Blaise noted that it was empty. It was the carriage which De Soulter had ordered to call for him at Villa Mirador in the hope of inducing his goddess to take a drive. For the form, Blaise fumbled in the pockets he knew quite well were empty. "What was the bet I lost to you?" he be-thought himself to inquire.

"Your honor forgets very easily."

"Ah, but I make so many wagers," sighed the secretary.

"Each and every one of which is in violation of the laws of the country. He confesses to the police that he is a common gambler," proclaimed the gendarme. "With no visible means of support. Not a penny in his pockets. It becomes my duty," announced Tylendonck, "to take you to headquarters as a suspicious character. In these days we take no chances." He drew up his horse, was in the saddle, and had once more laid hold of Blaise's bridle before that worthy could realize what was happening. And side by side they set out at a steady walk along the highroad.

"My model gendarme," requested the prisoner in his most honeyed tones, when ninety seconds of ignominy had given him ample time to collect his wits, "will you suffer me to whisper ten words in your private ear?"

"Nine," conceded Tylendonck. "But no more. Choose them carefully."

To the desperate captive there had flashed a marvellous idea. In the depths of, perhaps because of, his present humiliation, his good genius had inspired him. The question which had bothered him for an hour back, it appeared possible to solve. It would only require him to abandon his good resolve to play his hand alone—and what is that to any practical man or woman? And anything was better than this degrading farce of being arrested. He leaned toward his captor and whispered.

The gendarme stared at him.

"I mean it," insisted Blaise. "And I'm not mad, as you appear to suspect. If you'll halt your horse, since we're going in quite the wrong direction, and listen to my instructions, I'll put you in the way of earning a half of fifty thousand crowns."

"Is this bribery?" asked Tylendonck severely. "A lure to make me relax my vigilance? Would you *buy* your liberty?"

"Far from it!" protested Blaise, with a fine show of indignation. "When I want to bribe you, I'll go about it far differently. No, indeed, I'm merely trying to show you, as a policeman, where your highest duty lies. Co-operation between citizens like myself and the law (represented by you), is, we are told, continually necessary. For this reason alone, I ask you to drop my bridle, and listen while I tell a most interesting story."

The trooper tossed Blaise the reins. "It is weak of me," he sighed. "Lamentably injudicious. But after all, if I decide that you are lying, I can always re-arrest you. Proceed, sir, I beg."

"Fifty yards up that lane," said Blaise, pointing with his thumb, "I perceive a clump of willows. Their grateful shade will assure us a desirable privacy. I can never talk at ease on the public highway. Will you follow me?" And without waiting the trooper's assent, he turned off the road, and trotted up the lane to dismount under cover of the bushy trees. Here he talked to his captor earnestly and rapidly for five minutes. At the end of that time, Tylendonck was again in the saddle, and the oddly assorted pair shook hands.

"Mind you," cautioned Blaise, "it is no more than a suspicion, but I think he's your man."

"In any case," returned the gendarme, "I shall have brought in a most notorious vagabond. Probably," he guessed generously, "the same scoundrel who robbed and mishandled Mr. De Souter in Queen's Wood. There's a reward out for his arrest, too."

"I appreciate your confidence in me," Blaise assured him warmly. "And I have no doubt that you'll fulfil your end of the bargain, in case the man proves to be—?"

"On the honor of the Royal Rurals!" swore Tylendonck. "If I win the reward which is posted for taking into custody a most—a most notorious striker, half of it goes to you."

"And you shall be paid my own small debt tomorrow," Blaise returned. "I regret that I have overlooked it."

"And anything I may have been compelled to do to you, in the execution of my duty," the gendarme entreated, "you must also overlook, if you'll be so kind."

"Forgotten already," smiled Blaise, who still smarted with rage. "But make haste, good trooper, or you may lose him altogether."

"You think he's somewhere about the park at Villa Mirador?"

"He was there an hour ago, certainly."

"The Royal Rurals," said Tylendonck sonorously, "never fail to get their man."

A guardian of the law less keen and zealous than he who pricked along the dusty road toward the Villa, would have been discouraged in his quest from the very start. He had so little to go on. He had been furnished merely with a perfect description of the man he was after, fairly accurate information as to where he could be found, and word as to his quarry's inclination to seek the society of certain dwellers at Villa Mirador. "I'm not a member of the detective branch," sighed Tylendonck. "Indeed I despise that service as tending to make men suspicious, unduly curious, and meddlesome. But today I'd like to be one. I wonder," he mused, "if I ought not to disguise myself as an old apple woman."

But whatever may have been his plans for working with sagacity and steely efficiency, he was presently confronted like many another idealist, by the stubborn, mocking conditions imposed by actuality. He found himself at the park gates; and their sight immediately sent flying

from his head any scheme of operations other than a patrol of the several shady walks which had been cut in various direction through the trees and shrubbery. "The plan lacks all imagination," Tylendonck acknowledged, "but it must be correct because it or something similar is prescribed in regulations."

Thus comforted, he began a systematic search. Riding along one side of the garden wall, his keen eye noticed at one spot a trace of fresh footprints in a bit of soft mould. But there were two sets of them, one evidently a woman's. "And so the larger ones cannot possibly be the vagabond's," the gendarme reasoned, "for no female from Villa Mirador would by any possibility be walking in the park with a rogue suspected of assault and robbery. And should it prove to be the other person," Tylendonck concluded, "he would be walking alone as befits his lofty station. No, we must look further."

Two minutes later, he saw that which made him pause. He caught a glimpse of a woman in white, or some other cool color, seated on a log some distance up a path he chanced to cross. She had with her a man, crouching on the ground in front of her. "Lovers," he argued, quickly getting out of sight. "Probably Phoebe the pretty kitchen maid. This sort of thing cannot be allowed. But first let us make sure who the young person may be. If she is anybody but pretty Phoebe, I shall not interfere, since youth must be served."

Filled with the spirit of the scout and the midnight raider, he fastened Jet to a convenient branch; he unshipped the snaffle reins (which can be converted at a pinch into either a scourge or most workmanlike bonds), and wormed his way to a point from which he had a capital view of the girl and the fellow by the fallen log. And struck dumb with amazement was Tylendonck. Here was no pretty Phoebe with a swain from farm or

stable. Here were lovers, very truly. But the one was unquestionably the daintiest of heiresses—melting as honey, warm as sunlight, provoking as a flower; and the man who held her in his arms, the man to whom her heart was speaking through her kisses, answered in every point to the description Blaise had given of a ne'er-do-well, tricky vagabond.

At sight of the enlaced, enchanted pair the gendarme shut his eyes and turned his back. "Though I am not a gentleman," said Tylendonck, "I refuse to spy upon the love affairs of the young, the beautiful, and the trustful. However spicy. However innocent. But as a sleuth-hound," he added sternly, carefully parting the branches to obtain a better view, "I must keep my suspect constantly in view."

To this laudable purpose the gendarme was commendably faithful. Steadily he watched the man; he tried conscientiously not to watch the girl—a difficult task, for man and girl were never very far apart even when reluctantly, they took up their return journey toward the Villa.

But presently Tylendonck's task was simplified. With a final embrace, with a new exchange of what must have been the tenderest of vows, the man dropped down from the wall, and turned away. Lightly he followed a path which would lead him directly to the highroad; he strode along with face uplifted. He wore a look of exaltation, as of one dedicated to high purposes.

"But I must never forget that appearances are deceitful," Tylendonck repeated, arming himself against his inclination to regard this ragged, secret rogue as somebody quite different. He fetched a little circle through the woods, and, coming out on the path at a point where the vagabond could not fail to pass, he had barely time to assume a fitting air of outraged virtue and stern re-

proof—which is hard when one is out of breath—when sure enough the vagabond came swinging down the narrow, leafy track.

He had barely time to recall the regulations governing the methods of handling refractory prisoners, before the rascal in question flung up his arms in welcome, with a cry of joy.

“A gendarme, by all that’s lucky!” And it was with an outstretched hand that he advanced on Tylendonck.

“Any attempt on the part of a prisoner to deceive by a false appearance of friendship,” cautioned the Royal Rural rapidly, “will be severely punished.”

“You’re no friend of mine yet,” the other acknowledged. “But arrest me, old precious, and I’m yours for life.”

“You surrender?”

“Surrender? Good heavens, I offer and present myself.”

“This,” said Tylendonck, “is new in my experience. On what charge do I arrest you?”

“Vagabondage. Piracy.”

“That’s a serious offence, my lad.”

“Ho, it’s the most wonderful, marvellous, fruitful crime that anybody’s committed since time began. And I—”

“Impenitent?”

“Utterly!” cried the youth. “I’m a vagabond for life. To get into jail for being a rogue will please her enormously. It will show her that I’m in earnest—that I’m all she’s hoped of me.” He flung back his head; his eyes danced at the shimmering sky. “Oh, but I’m happy!” shouted the villain fervently.

“Stow that!” ordered Tylendonck. “You’re under arrest.”

"Good! Really—? Thanks, old priceless. Tie me up. You've done a good day's work."

He said no more till they were well along on the way to the Royal Rural's headquarters. They followed an unfrequented road, which the gendarme chose for the sake of avoiding scandal. Then, as if struck by a sudden thought, the happy captive looked up into the face of the impassive trooper on the tall horse.

"Is your name Tylendonck?"

The trooper acknowledged that such was the fact.

"The gendarme who fetched a certain youthful criminal one rainy day to Villa Mirador?"

"Yes," was the reply, delivered with some bitterness. "And I'm still waiting for the ten crowns I earned by the job."

"All of which puts the finishing touch on everything!" cried the prisoner. "Wait till somebody hears! "I am led in bonds!" And he leaped into the air. "I am the prisoner of Tylendonck—the trophy of his zeal—the crown of his triumph. Who wouldn't be a vagabond at such a rate? It proves that I'm real!" he exulted.

You may be sure that Tylendonck pondered deeply on this, though he affected to pay no attention at all to his captive's exclamations. Because he was either too well mannered to show curiosity, or too scornful, he asked no questions. Nor did the prisoner offer any explanation. With a ridiculous cheerfulness he strode along for a mile or more, keeping pace with the stout horse, and presenting to his captor a model of behavior by which, swore Tylendonck, he would forever after judge all men under arrest. Indeed the gendarme was fast drifting into a state of placid boredom, when something happened to jerk him alive in a jiffy.

They had just emerged from a little patch of wood-

land on a wide expanse of rolling farm country. Away in the amethyst distance, the spires of the city by the river shone in the westerling sun.

"Hark!" exclaimed the prisoner. Abruptly he halted. He twitched at the leather strap which connected him to the gendarme. "Listen!"

Tylendonck drew rein. For an instant the two stood motionless, straining their ears.

"D'you hear it?"

"What?"

"*That!*" the vagabond cried thrillingly.

For there rolled round the land, solemn, measured, cadenced, the booming of a distant bell. Another moment, and the summons from the gleaming city, dolorous yet quickening, was clanged anew from the belfry of the church in the red-roofed village close at hand. Presently the golden air was all a-quiver with the sound, as echoes tossed the plangent clamor of still more bells across the listening country.

"The tocsin!" breathed the vagabond. "The call to arms!"

"So—it's come!" muttered Tylendonck. For a moment he stared fixedly in front of him. Then he looked down at his prisoner, so young, so vividly alive, as he hearkened to the sombre rolling of the bells. "When do you go, my lad?"

"With the first!" His face was all alright with a new and fine enthusiasm. "Untie me, for God's sake, Tylendonck. They're waiting for me."

But the gendarme pursed his lips judicially. "You'd be safer far in jail," he offered kindly.

The other turned white. "You'd not try to stop me?" he gasped.

"But I don't understand," protested the trooper. "Half an hour ago, you took being arrested as a vagabond as a

great favor. But now, when the call to arms is sounding, when war—”

“Yes, yes, yes!” the youth cried passionately, raising his shackled hands. “Half an hour ago, I was a vagabond. For the best reason in the world. But now—”

“What are you—now?”

The youth straightened splendidly. Confusedly, the gendarme saw him as it were transfigured. So it was that Blaise had seen him in the garden. His air, his bearing, the eagle look in his eye, all seemed to cry aloud the truth about him. His ragged clothes, the weather-stains, the broken shoes, appeared but parts of a thin disguise. Tylendonck stiffened to attention in the saddle. “Let us be on the safe side!” he muttered. “Sire!” he shouted with a smart salute. But it was as though the other had not heard him. Whatever the trooper expected as the answer to his challenge—smiling acknowledgement or brusque denial, reproof, or compliment, or even vagabond mockery—did not happen. He dropped his hand, feeling rather an ass. “You said—?” he babbled.

“I am a soldier,” said the vagabond simply. “As are you, my friend. Let me go to my duty. You go to yours. They’re waiting for us. Good God, what time we’re wasting!”

“I should fail in my duty to wife and children,” returned the policeman musingly, “if I threw away the chance of winning a reward of fifty thousand crowns.”

“If you don’t report to your barracks within a half hour after hearing the call to arms, you’ll be court-martialled.”

“True,” agreed the horseman, vexed at the turn matters had taken. “Let’s be off to headquarters.”

So saying, he shortened his hold on the leash which held the prisoner, gathered his reins, and touched good Jet with shining spur. As the horse lunged forward, the

vagabond was pulled to his knees. "Get up!" ordered Tylendonck impatiently, twitching the strap. "None o' that, my boy." But fuming he had to stop his horse again as he tried to fasten his end of the leash to some convenient ring on the saddle. The vagabond struggled, but made such a poor matter of rising that the trooper hastily decided on a new way of fetching him along. "If I undo the strap," he asked, "will you come quiet?"

"I won't say a word," returned the vagabond.

"I shall have my eye on you," warned Tylendonck. And he added, patting the butt of the pistol which protruded from his holster, "if you make a move to run, I'll drill you like a flash."

"And the Royal Rurals," said the prisoner most civilly, scrambling to his feet, "are renowned for their marksmanship."

He backed up to the trooper, raising his hands so that the latter could untie the knot in the leash. He stood with perfect docility while Tylendonck leaned down to perform this office, the trooper letting the reins fall on the horse's neck, puffing as he leaned far down to wrestle with the tightly drawn noose. He had to use both hands. "Stand still!" he bellowed to Jet for fidgetting a little. "Come closer!" he stormed at the prisoner. "Damn the horse!" shouted Tylendonck, as Jet, annoyed by all this commotion and anxious to be home, took a couple of steps forward. But the trooper's ejaculation was lost in the next second's confusion. Leaning far down from his saddle, wrestling with the knot, he had so dangerously shifted his balance that, when his mount started up, he toppled. Quick as a flash, his prisoner whirled about. His hands tore clear of the loosened leash, and seizing the swaying officer by the shoulders, he dragged him heavily to the ground with a crash of accoutrements.

Another second, and he was astride the astonished horse, with a kick of his heels to send him clear.

"Sorry!" he panted, as Tylendonck started to scramble to his feet. "But if you will be such an ass—!"

"Stop!" bawled the trooper. "Halt, in the name of the law!"

But there came no answer save the defiant drumming of a horse's hoofs, as the fugitive put Jet to a gallop down the dusty road.

"There's one thing sure," mused Tylendonck, as he took up his way afoot, fuming and aching. "My informant has proved himself wholly unreliable. Yonder's no prince. Yonder's nothing but a vagabond of the commonest sort. He lacks," said Tylendonck, brushing the dust from his uniform, "every single decent human trait. And a fine story I'll have to tell the brigadier about losing the horse to boot."

Down the road, through the gathering twilight, sped the vagabond. The air was still heavy with the bourdon of the alarm bells. He passed groups of old men and women eagerly talking. He overtook young men trudging toward the town with women hanging on their arms. Some of the women were softly weeping; some showed faces alight with patience of consecration to high callings. Here and there he caught the gleaming scarlet, white, and gold of the flag hung from a cottage window. In front of a police barracks, in the village nearest the city, a trooper pointed to his horse and shouted; he called to some of his fellows.

"My honest lad," the vagabond whispered to Jet, reining him down when they passed the next turn in the road, "your usefulness has ended. I thank you for your very kind cooperation; but here we part. There may be questions asked as to why you are keeping such question-

able company." Dismounting, he tied the beast to a convenient fence. "A little patience, old one, and they'll be taking you home to supper."

Then, with a look about him to make sure he was not being followed, the vagabond struck across the fields towards a less travelled road, which should lead him to the city by the river.

Through streets athrob with rumor and the tumult of marching crowds, one slips all unobserved. Orators declaim on café terraces; lights and flags and the blare of field music set the pulses quivering; there are no eyes in the crowds for the slim, dusty figure which climbs the lofty hill toward the castle. Only once did he stop. Before some tall closed gates which barred the entrance to a splendid, stretching avenue, he checked his hurried flight. Far below, the seething city flared and shouted. Here all was very quiet and solemn under the high arch of the velvety night. Here at the gates there lingered none more important than a pair of lovers, two tired children, and an old, old man. Wearily they stood there, as those who have waited long and with fading hopes. Beyond the escutcheoned gates, beneath two over-arching rows of ancient trees, the broad white way stretched off to a mysterious distance. Far away, loomed purple, twilit mountains at the edge of the world.

"We want to go in," the children whimpered, as the vagabond halted.

"And I," said the old man, nodding. He smiled apologetically, smoothing his white beard. "I dare say it appears very strange, but—"

"Hush!" the lovers whispered, one to another, edging closer, drawn by they knew not what attraction towards the dim-seen Road-to-the-Mountains at the edge of the world. They held hands, awkwardly.

No more now than a shape in the dusk, the vagabond

laid his hand on the frowning grille. He took from a thong around his neck a little key of curious pattern. And silently the gates fell open, for all to pass who cared to.

“He has come back!” ran the new rumor through the city that same night of fever and turbulent joy. “What? No. The ministers have not said he has returned, nor have the trumpeters blown the tidings on the corners of the streets. We will believe it when we see him,” announced the sober and wise.

“But the gates of the Road-to-the-Mountains!”

“Alas!”

“The gates were made open by some one. That is sure. For he walked through, and we saw—”

“Fairies and soldiers and giants and everything,” asserted the youngest of the children, as he toiled into his bed.

And two days later, the soldiers, a stern young strippling at their head at whom folks pointed wonderingly, marched steadily out of the city towards that which might be waiting beyond the mountains at the edge of the world.

CHAPTER XVII

PLANS were changed. With the world turned upside down there was nothing to be gained by spending the winter in town. Villa Mirador remained open, to its master's unconcealed delight. Blaise had departed, in a becoming uniform, to his new and dangerous duties in the base supply depot. Oswald, lamenting that his figure prevented his joining the cavalry, his health the artillery, his birth and refinement the infantry, came to the sensible decision that he could be of great use to his country by helping assiduously to keep up his neighbors' spirits, and so at his great house entertained whoever cared to enjoy an excellent dinner. It annoyed him excessively that, owing to the war, he had only women servants to wait upon his guests.

"It hasn't disappointed you too much, my dear, not going to town for the winter?" Alicia asked one day.

"With Oswald in the country?" responded her niece ingenuously. "I'm sure that nothing could be nicer than to stay just as we are."

"And what the devil did she mean by that?" wondered the watchful Alicia to herself.

"Charming, the dear child, isn't she!" approved Marcelle De Gerouville one evening at De Souters. "That pensive air—that little look of sorrow shading her face just a tiny bit when she fancies nobody's watching her! Positively she's quite the type—the girl with a hero at the front."

"Wrong, my love, for once," Alicia assured her neighbor. "The sweet thing hasn't a worry in the world.

Of course, like all of us in these cruel days—!” She let her eyes rest for a moment, where the girl stood with their host on the far side of the luxurious, gilded room. Oswald was telling her some long, long tale, with gestures. “The thing’s impossible,” Alicia decided inwardly. “She doesn’t know a soul in the army. She doesn’t know any man, except—but that would be *too* absurd.” And she was between vexation and amusement that a recollection of the idle gipsy who had lingered a day—how long, a week?—about Villa Mirador, story telling, should have recurred to her at that moment.

“Delightful host, Oswald!” she remarked, as they were rolling home an hour later. “A man of genuine ability. I wonder if it’s true that he’s going to marry the oldest Brissac girl.”

Her companion in the carriage sighed. Enviously? Who could say? “Elaine is awfully attractive,” she responded.

“Pooh.” returned Alicia promptly. “She’s sensible—that’s all. She *uses* the little which the good Lord planted and her good mother watered. If she had half of *your* looks and natural charm, my love—not that I want to speak of these things! Well, I dare say that a husband is not the only prize to be had in the world,” she concluded in a tone of resignation. “But of course you’ll marry somebody, some day.”

Pending that far-off event, the careful Alicia made it possible for De Soulter to form a judgment regarding Eugenie Louise as many times each week as could be managed without frightening him. She was actuated by the very best motives; she sought for her little niece that sole security so many women believe in—an advantageous marriage. And the master of Queen’s Wood, who was, I think, a pretty good fellow at heart, came by degrees to appear rather less a ridiculous ass than one would

judge him to be at first sight. One could approve warmly of his activity and new generosity in all good works of relief which the needs of the war brought to light. He bustled perpetually; he was a member of many boards; he rejoiced in his new title of "Commissioner." He modestly agreed with those who assured him, like Marcelle, that he was doing quite as much for the common cause as the soldiers in the field.

And presently it became obvious enough that he was seeking excuses for coming to Villa Mirador. Now it was for the purpose of consulting with Alicia about some war charity, now to ask advice of Tristram (which he rarely accepted), again to refresh himself from his labors (as he expressed it) in the society of the girl in whose face Marcelle had fancied she saw a shadow of sorrow. She listened to him with the well bred attention which surpassed patience as a virtue; she let him teach her games of cards; she poured tea for him prettily; she accompanied him sedately now and then on a walk over wood-paths crisp with frozen snow.

"God bless my soul!" said Oswald to the girl, on their return from one of these excursions, "I—I feel sometimes that I'm really happy only with you."

"It has been good today," she answered, breathing luxuriously a final draught of the wintry, heady air before she went indoors. She looked up into the violet sky. "So beautiful!"

"With you," he insisted as if making a distinction. "If I may venture to say so."

"Really?" She lowered her eyes. "How absurd of you!"

He hovered closer to her excitedly. "You know what I mean. I—I can never express myself, when I feel anything deeply, you know. In my heart. All over. But if I could be with you—"

He could not finish. At that moment the door was opened wide by Phoebe the housemaid, promoted now that Anthony had turned into a gunner.

"Won't you come in?" invited Eugenie Louise demurely.

"Not—if you will excuse me." The great man stammered. The presence of Phoebe abashed him horribly. The scaffolding of courage which he had erected, on which he hoped to stand while making his great speech, collapsed utterly. He backed away from the doorstep. "I—it's very late. Thank you. I—"

She extended her hand. "It's I who should thank you," she returned. "You've been delightful."

"Oh!" cried Oswald, choked with emotion, beaming against the wintry background like a beacon. "Well—until another time. I hope very soon. May I? May I, Miss Buchanan?" And he retreated with a bow.

Inside the house, the girl stood motionless a moment, listlessly resigning her furs to Phoebe's keeping. "No, nothing more," she answered to the little maid's eager offer of further service. The place was perfectly still and quiet; its atmosphere of warmth and repose enveloped her softly. She would amuse or tease herself by fancying that, after she had left it for an hour, she would return to find Villa Mirador somehow changed. Vainly, as she knew full well. In one comfortable room, at this hour when the candles were being lighted, her good old uncle was pottering about his endless papers, and observing that it was time his niece was home to pour his tea. She knew that beyond that door, at the end of the hall, her aunt Alicia, erect and austere, was knitting another of her interminable scarves, and asking what could be keeping Eugenie Louise out so late. She could see her aunt's smooth smile and the flutter of her eyelids, as she inquired about Oswald. The chances were that he

would return that very evening on some excuse, and she would be required to appear in the drawing room—silken, scented, delicate, the young lady of the household. Every day the same—life taken out of her hands and directed for her, life made a thing not of generous adventure and experiment, but of smooth and oiled and comfortable routine.

“Vagabond!” called Eugenie Louise in a whisper, as she stood there, frightened, in the hall. “Come to me—speak to me!”

Tense and trembling, she listened for an answer—the reply which he swore that he would send her from the ends of the world whenever she cried his name. She moved to one of the seats before the windows, and knelt there, peering out across the twilit land, up towards where the young moon hung. She saw for leagues—past dale and upland, town and river, yonder away to the east where, at that hour, the sullen guns stabbed the darkness with their flashes, and the snow showed crimson stains.

“Speak to me!”

She had his promise; she knew that he would keep it. He had but to hear her calling. But there was so much noise, out there in the battle! So many voices dinned in his ears—duty, adventure, responsibility, sacrifice, comradeship, that perhaps the soldier could not hear the voice of a mere girl at home—just for the moment. And she tried not to hate the war. That was where he had gone, of course. And she was glad of it, for his sake. He could not have been an Oswald content with lesser tasks. And had he not tried to speak with her? She felt sure of it. Sometimes she would wake in the darkness with the feeling that the vagabond had called her from a post just below her window, that he was whispering at the door.

Dreams! Unsubstantial almost as the strange hours they had passed together in Queen's Wood; vain as the delicious hour of love and passion and longing, when she lay in his arms, a princess with her pirate, yonder in Martinique.

"I want you!" she called out into the wintry twilight, quiveringly, silently.

"Madame's love, and she would like to see you in her room, miss," reported Phoebe, arriving like a messenger from the world of Villa Mirador.

The girl at the window shivered, closed her eyes an instant, then turned about. She was white. "Has my aunt been at home all the afternoon?"

"Yes, miss."

And that was true, so far as pretty Phoebe knew. As a matter of fact however, towards three o'clock, Alicia decided upon a bit of a walk, just for the sake of some exercise and the open air—an odd pleasure for any lady to seek, people said, marvelling. Perhaps it was partly because of her grim satisfaction in being original, that she persisted in taking a brisk promenade whenever the weather was at all favorable. Serene and stark, she was following the driveway leading to the gates. She rounded a turn in the road, and for a moment checked her brisk steps in some surprise. For directly toward her came a soldier.

He saluted and halted. "Is this Villa Mirador?"

She closed her eyes to the fellow's lack of decent civility, schooling herself anew to accept what was commonly blamed on, or excused by, the war.

"It is."

"Got a letter for some party living there," he announced, unbuttoning one of his sagging pockets.

"Are you—from the army?"

"You've said it. Ten days leave. I live in the city,

and was going by this way anyhow, 'n' a feller asked me would I hand this in."

"What—feller?" inquired Alicia, enjoying the sensation of using that queer word.

"In an ammunition train. He got it off a guy goin' to the hospital who'd been hit. I don't know where *he* got it. Travelled some, this letter has. But it ain't any trouble to pass it along. Do you know this party?"

He offered her the letter, creased, stained, damp, smudgy, which he had found at length in the bottom of his pocket. It bore no stamp, no mark of any kind save the address in a scrawling, misformed hand: *To E. L. B., at Villa Mirador.*

"Yes," Alicia acknowledged. Her first impulse on seeing the address was to deny that any person of those initials lived at Villa Mirador, or ever had. But this would have entailed too many complications. The soldier looked a determined sort; he might easily insist on going personally to the house to make further inquiries; there was a chance of his—. "And that would never, never do!" shuddered Alicia, realizing that Eugenie Louise was walking with De Soulter.

"Will you take it?" asked the soldier, a bit impatiently. She smiled. "Can you trust me?"

"Well," he answered sturdily, "the letter's this far all right. And I guess you wouldn't be so mean as to hold up a letter from a soldier to his girl."

"But how do you know—?"

"Ah," replied the warrior, "who else would the guy be writing to?"

He turned about with a curt nod, and went whistling back the way he had come. And Alicia, studying the crumpled missive she held between thumb and finger, decided that after all she would give up her walk that

afternoon, for she could think best—when serious thinking was to be done—in her own quiet sitting room.

But after all there is only one thing for devoted parents or guardians to do, when they have to decide a question which touches their darlings' happiness. It did not take Alicia above ten seconds to choose her course of action, after she had quietly locked the door of her room, and had opened the letter from the front addressed to E. L. B.

Of course she opened it, my dear. What else would she have done?

Standing by the window in the fading light, she carefully slipped a thin knife blade under the outer fold, breaking the rough red seals as cleanly as possible. There was no envelope. The missive consisted merely of a single sheet folded together twice, with the address on the back. She worked with circumspection, very delicately, because at first she was not quite sure what she would do with her discovery; and it is always desirable, on general principles, to leave no traces when you have opened another person's mail. But one glance at the contents was enough. Who was this impudent, secret fellow, this soldier who dared write her niece such an intimate, saucy, confident, confidential message?

“Soon, soon, pray God, at Martinque”

What did he mean? Where or what was Martinque? The name suggested naked negroes and—and perhaps palm trees; but it meant of course something quite different. Oh, these girls of to-day! The best thing one can do for them and for all concerned is to marry them off the day that they leave the convent—as civilized parents have done for years. Let their husbands take care of them. She studied the handwriting; but the rough, masculine, hasty scrawl meant nothing to her

beyond the fact that it appeared the work of a fellow of no education. She was bothered by the notion that the script did not seem to accord at all with the phrases of the message itself—for in this she was dimly aware of a certain undefinable ring of something like poetry, of imagination, of fervor, call it what you will. Who was he, this soldier? That vagabond? Incredible! Out of the question. But who was the man her niece had met in the woods, on that disgraceful day of runaway adventure? They had never got to the bottom of that story, she was convinced, said Alicia again, with a tightening of the lips.

“At any rate,” she cried angrily, “this isn’t going to make any trouble.” And she looked with an approving eye at the nice, brisk fire which glowed behind the andirons.

“Wait a bit,” cautioned her better judgment—and it chuckled as it spoke. “There’s another way to dispose of the thing. What if—?”

“Good!” smiled Alicia contentedly.

She made her arrangements quickly. She was seated before the tall secretary in the corner of the room, busily engaged in sorting papers, the capable, orderly housewife, when Eugenie Louise knocked lightly at the door.

“Is that you, my dear?” she called brightly. “Do come in. Just a second, till I finish collecting this rubbish.”

The girl felt anew a little thrill of vague wonder and curiosity as to what mysterious documents were tucked away in the recesses of the tall old desk. Such a secret old fellow, that case of drawers, with the handles like grinning brass lips! He treasured, she was sure, whole bundles and sheaves of fascinating letters from strange corners of the world, mementoes, relics, a thousand hints from which one could recreate the story of Villa Mirador

—even of Alicia herself, that woman who was never ruffled, never at a loss, never—indiscreet. Had she ever been in love? Yet seen there in the light of the two flanking candles, she had not a little beauty—dark and regular and clear-cut.

“I’m interrupting you,” said the girl after waiting a moment. She had not sat down. She stood by the table, idly turning the pages of a book lying there, drooped a little as if from weariness.

“Not a bit of it. I’ve just finished.”

She tore up another old letter, a dry smile just curving her lips as she re-read its last page. She laid the pieces on a pile of other crumpled, torn-up papers which littered the desk in front of her.

“Mercy, what shall I do with all this trash?”

“The fire?” suggested Eugenie Louise.

“Burning paper is so untidy. It’s apt to blow about.”

“I can crush down the pieces under the logs.”

“Will you, my dear? Thank you. I hate to bother you.” She possessed to perfection the rare art of making others believe that their most trivial service was of inestimable value—that she would have been fearfully at a loss but for their suggestions or offers of assistance. The tender, affectionate smile, the light caress of hand on hand, with which she greeted and thanked the girl as the latter crossed the room to her side, told how happy she was that Eugenie Louise had come just then to relieve her, to assist her in a tedious task. “I’m afraid you’ll have to make more than one trip,” she added, as the girl collected a ragged mass of fragments in her two hands. “Just drop them in anyhow.”

She turned in her chair, to watch the first lot go up in bright, quick flames. A little puff of acrid smoke poured into the room. “That will do nicely. Come and get the rest,” she directed, as her niece lingered at the

fireplace, looking absently into the newly kindled blaze.

“Don’t drop any.”

“Have I everything?” asked the girl, as she swept together another double handful. There projected from one side a bit of crumpled, stained, smudged paper with a rough looking seal.

“Yes,” said Alicia, in a voice fairly vibrant with a sudden satisfaction. She sat back, folding her hands tight as she rested them on the edge of her desk. Her knuckles were white. She drew a deep breath as of profound relief. “Yes. Take them.”

This time she did not look. She was afraid to show so much as a flicker of concern or interest. She strained her ears to hear the light, thin roar which should follow the thrust of the papers into the blaze.

“Are they in?” she inquired at length, very idly.

“Yes. But this is funny.”

“What?”

“One of your letters,” laughed Eugenie Louise, “refuses to burn.”

“Impossible!”

In spite of herself, she rose with a start, with a loud beating heart. She saw that the girl stood resting her forehead against the high mantle-shelf, looking down into the fire.

“That one,” she said, pointing with her shoe-tip. “With the seals. It fell on top.”

“Push it in with the poker.”

“Must I? The poor thing so hates to be destroyed.”

“It’s rubbish.” declared Alicia.

The sheet of paper blackened and twisted. A thin line of gold and scarlet showed along its edges.

“I’ll put it out of its misery,” smiled the girl sombrely, “since it is fated.”

"It is, I assure you," smiles her aunt, standing at her side. "Finish it."

Obediently, the girl thrust the writhing fragment deeper into the hungry blaze. Just as the letter flamed and died to a flake of black, she looked round with an expression of stark, half frightened wonder.

"I thought," said Eugenie Louise, "that I saw my own initials on that letter."

"Nonsense!" returned Alicia, with another sigh.

"E. L. B.—?"

"My sweet," her aunt remonstrated, circling her waist with an affectionate arm. "You are a lamb and I love you, but positively you have more fancies than even your beloved uncle."

CHAPTER XVIII

IT is no part of his duty, as this chronicler sees it, to record the incidents of one of those horrid physical contests called wars, which until recently disfigured our civilization. True, he might be tempted by sentimental considerations to extol the gallantry of a tiny nation and its citizens fighting for ideals such as liberty. As an old time hero worshipper, he might furtively incline to record deeds and scenes of what used to be called self-sacrifice and chivalry. But since a new and decent world of drab has decreed that war in general is not a subject to be mentioned in the presence of refined company (and for that reason does not exist), one blushes hotly for having even referred to the shocking thing.

Expect no tale at this point of how a prince and his troops behaved in battle. Look for no account of how men endured privation and courted death in defense of a cause they counted just. Suffice it to say that a winter campaign of old-fashioned fury was conducted to a point where a tyrannous power was forced rather breathlessly to yield its pretension to suzerainty over a little land of hardy patriots; peace was concluded; and word came to Villa Mirador that the home-coming soldiers would pass that way at noon, on their triumphant march to the garlanded city.

The day broke frosty and clear—a day of turquoise, ivory, and silver. A tingling gaiety was in the air, which fancy saw reflected even in the shining faces of the country folk already moving along the highway to be in time for the soldiers, when Tristram entered his library,

and went to the tall window which overlooked the road.

A day of rejoicing, but the poet's face was lined and weary. He stared down from his window with lack-lustre eyes. He was old. His voice was so altered that Anthony, who had returned to civil life with a decoration for bravery, glanced up in surprise as he entered the room.

"Is that you, Blaise?" the poet asked querulously, not looking round.

Anthony was politely disdainful of that gallant officer, who also had been relieved of his arduous duties. "No, sir. *Me sir.*"

"But I wanted my secretary," Tristram complained. Very unlike himself, the master this morning. "What are *you* doing here?"

The perfect domestic picked up a chair from the centre of the room and set it against the wall. "Very sorry to disturb your honor."

"Then stop disturbing me."

"Beg pardon, sir," returned Anthony with the serene firmness of one whose moral position is unshakable, "but Madame directed me to clear the room."

"Did Madame reveal the reason for this—hullabaloo?"

"Yes, sir. Miss Eugenie Louise will take her dancing practice here this morning."

At that Tristram exploded. On the morning when the troops were passing by! His niece was to take her dancing practice indeed, as though nothing had happened in the world! Not by a long shot! Any niece of his worth her salt was going to turn out to meet the soldiers, like every other girl in the land, and be human.

"Dancing? Bosh!"

"Yes, sir," agreed Anthony quickly. And he added the information that Oswald was expected about noon.

"For—dancing practice?" It was not often that

Tristram sneered, and he did it very badly. But such was the general effect of his question, anyhow. "Other men of the country—you, my man—have been fighting and dying." But he must have felt sorry to have said anything so very unkind, for immediately he explained to Anthony that Oswald had been restrained from service in the very forefront of battle only by his figure.

"Yes, sir," conceded Anthony stiffly. "The household hears." he went on, privileged like the "traditional old retainer of all old stories like this one, that him and Miss Eugenie Louise—well, if that's what *she* wants, here's hoping!" emitted Anthony loyally, moving another chair with emphasis.

"What?" demanded Tristram thickly and redly. He laid hold of the seventh volume of Barhydt's invaluable History of Finland which lay to his hand.

"Yes, sir."

"Get out of here!" And Barhydt was sent hurtling across the room at the old retainer's head, followed by Grotius (calf), the Lives of the Spanish Queens (half morocco), and the poems of Lady De Vere (limp buckskin). And I fancy that the silver inkstand would have followed the first volley, had not Anthony quit the field incontinent. "Imbeciles!" shouted the indignant poet. "And tell my niece that I want to see her at once."

"Yes, your honor," came back from the doorway. "The—the household was certainly misinformed, sir, and—Mr. Blaise," he broke off to announce in his best drawing room manner.

Sure enough, the secretary appeared, his expression not a little concerned from his having caught some echo of the storm.

Speechlessly Tristram beckoned to him. The poet flung himself into a chair behind the writing table. He

flourished his hands as if fighting away a swarm of stinging summer gnats. "And this is the morning when I hoped for something pleasant to happen!" was the greeting Blaise finally received.

"As your private secretary," he returned, busily and gracefully collecting the scattered books, "may I not share your many sorrows?"

"They're real enough," the poet assured him. "Do you know the date?"

"Ah—!" With an astonishing effort of memory, Blaise did recall the real significance to Tristram of that wintry morning. He tapped the side of his long nose. "The Rodenheim matter?" he suggested. "Of course, I've got so desperately out of touch with home matters, while in the service, that I dare say I'm quite wrong."

"No."

"How time does fly!" sighed the secretary. "And you haven't been able to—?"

"No."

"Tut, tut! Fancy!"

Tristram seemed to be speaking less to his companion than to himself. "Tomorrow I must pay Rodenheim his loan. Twenty-five thousand crowns. He will not extend. If I can't pay him—"

"Rodenheim gets the Villa Mirador?"

Tristram nodded. He looked down as if somehow ashamed.

"But, heavens, my dear employer and brother-in-law, don't you do any worrying. Let Rodenheim worry. That, in all such matters, is elementary."

But the poet shook his head. He was not to be put off. "Was there a note from Gerouville in the mail this morning?" he queried, so anxiously that Blaise decided he must really pay attention. "I wrote him a week ago. It

wasn't easy to ask him to help me in this matter, but I felt sure that he would. Such an old friend, you know. Hasn't he answered?"

"Gerouville's probably in town," Blaise evaded.

"No—no. He's here. Alicia saw his wife yesterday." He hesitated. Blindly he turned over some papers on his table. "That's why I wanted to see you, Blaise, the first thing this morning. Er—probably my letter miscarried. I want you to wait on Gerouville for me at once. In my name. Before the confusion over the soldiers starts. Tell him the whole story. By God, Blaise, I can't lose Villa Mirador! And then too I want to pay Rodenheim—promptly, you know. Just the way we—my people—always have paid their obligations. I—it's a matter of pride, partly. I—. Lose Villa Mirador!" he repeated. "God, I can't sleep, thinking of it. Go straight to Gerouville, will you?"

"Yes, sir. Certainly." One wonders if the man was not a bit affected by his senior's unhappiness. Was it possible that he had grown just a little fond of his old benefactor? Or was he eager to go to the Gerouville chateau, for the chance it gave him of encountering Marcelle with the arctic blue eyes? "I'll go at once. I'll manage things," said Blaise. And with an honest shake of Tristram's hand, he was moving off when the latter stopped him.

"Not a word about this to Alicia," he ordered. "Nor to Eugenie Louise. We mustn't spoil a day like this, when the troops come home, by parading our private troubles."

There sounded a little knock at the door.

"Come in."

But though it was Eugenie Louise that entered, he had no eyes for her. She stood where she was, with her greeting gone cold on her lips.

"Make it very strong, Blaise—eh? I must have that—that thing today. You understand?"

He dismissed his secretary with a vague gesture, and for a moment leaned back heavily in his chair. His eyes closed. The sound of the door shutting brought him erect again, and he turned his regard on the girl who still stood fast by the entrance.

"You sent for me?" she murmured, as he stretched out a welcoming hand.

"Yes. How does the world look today?" And he sought to make his voice sound cheery.

"Cold," she answered. "Dreary. You haven't said good morning to me."

He held out both arms. "Forgive me."

"Not immediately," she answered severely. But she did cross the room to him. She studied him with a grave accusation in her eyes. She shook her head disapprovingly, after feeling his kiss on her cheek. "No good. You did that merely from a sense of duty. Worse," she sighed, though still she stayed within the compass of his arm, "you kissed me just because you have the habit. And this morning I did so want to be—"

The soft voice dwindled to less than a whisper. There was a long pause. Her lovely head was bent low; the lashes fluttered on the warm curve of her cheek. Aimlessly she traced with her middle finger a little pattern on the top of the table.

"I—I can't imagine why I'm crying over nothing," murmured somebody, as somebody sweetly young was drawn close into the fold of a sturdy old arm.

Said Tristram solemnly: "If that damned vagabond doesn't come marching home today with his battalion, I—I'll never forgive him."

She looked up with shining eyes. But she met her

uncle's glance as steadily as one can meet an uncle's glance, when one's chin is quivering.

"The vagabond is nothing to me," said Eugenie Louise "But I do hope he isn't killed or anything. He was such a dear friend of yours, Uncle Tristram."

He smiled. "Very well. I'll accept him. Strange, that we've never heard—"

"Nothing," she responded, like an echo of his unspoken words. "Nothing. Not a line. Not even—a thought, perhaps."

"Now that," said the poet, "is damned nonsense. Here, now—we've had enough gloom. What do you think? The troops will be passing about noon." He rose and handed the girl to a chair with the quaintly deferential ceremony which marked his kind. "We must be ready for them, my dear. That's what I wanted to see you about."

He crossed the room to a lofty, dark oaken press. The girl watched him, with the stir of interest she always felt when her uncle opened this ancient treasure chest. For it was nothing short of that, indeed. A score of times he had taken out of its cavernous depths, for her benefit, one relic or another of the life of the family—papers, books, a wedding dress, a sword, all the things which Blaise dreaded to review, each with its perfume of days gone by, each quaintly eloquent of the hopes and fears, adventures or failures, of the noble race from which the poet had sprung. Tender and happy hours she had spent, as the poet related the story of Spanish fan or Byzantine jewel, of parchments with the sign-manuals of dead kings, of little children's playthings. But it was odd that his mind had turned to such antique matters on the morning when the troops were coming by. Usually he chose a long afternoon of rain, or the hours when little nieces ought to be in bed.

He was not long. He took out of a deep drawer a folded packet wrapped in paper. He tore off the coverings with hands which trembled a bit. And then, before the girl could realize what this trove could be, the poet shook out flauntingly, in folds of faded scarlet, rusty white, and tarnished gold, a battle standard with their country's arms.

"My old regiment's."

She sprang to attention.

"It is for you," he told her, offering the flag. "You will wave it at the soldiers, as they pass Villa Mirador."

"Uncle!"

"Of course," he cried with a smile which was very tender.

"Give it to me." Reverently, she took the war-stained silk and kissed it. "This is his flag, too!" she whispered thrillingly.

"And he'll be there," the old man answered positively, knowing what was in her heart to utter. "He'll be there, my littlest."

They were not aware of Blaise's return. Discreetly he had tapped on the door; he had bent his ear to catch the murmur of voices; and recognizing that of Eugenie Louise, he had quietly opened the door without more ado, in time to see the end of the little scene which the girl and the old poet were playing with the faded, sacred flag. At sight of him, Tristram drew himself up, then held out a hand which shook like a leaf.

"Did you get it?" he demanded harshly. "Go to the window, child. You—you must be ready. Give it to me," he ordered of Blaise. His eyes were haggard as he snatched the folded paper Blaise presented. "Thanks. I—I won't detain you, my boy."

The other protested with a gesture. "As your private secretary," he reminded the poet with an air of outraged

dignity, "it is my duty for *me* to read your letters." He folded his arms. "You no longer trust me."

"Don't bother me."

"Sir," said the injured one, "I thank you for your courtesy," and swung away, making the most of his figure..

Tristram tore open the letter. Swiftly his eyes travelled down the page. The girl watched him, idly at first, then as anger and dismay darkened the poet's face, she stepped to his side and laid her hand on his shoulder, leaning close to him. But it was as though he did not feel her. He looked straight in front of him. He was trembling. In what was like a burst of sudden rage, he tore the letter across and flung it down on the table.

"What time is it?" he demanded thickly.

"Just after eleven, uncle."

"I can make it. There and back before noon." He faced her, fighting to recover his smile of old times. "It's nothing, my dear. An annoyance. Something to clear up, before—. I'll leave you for just a half hour. Some business."

"Bad news?" she ventured, glancing at the torn fragments on the table. But he made no answer, only hurried from the room. His disorder was so marked, his distress so evident, that Eugenie Louise herself caught a reflection of it. Ignorant of the cause, she nevertheless shared her uncle's trouble. A new apprehension laid cold hands on her; and she sent forth a flame of indignation, at random, to consume whoever it was who had brought that look of haunted anxiety into Tristram's eyes.

A day of rejoicing—but such a dreadful day! There were so many who would not come home this morning of bright sunshine—so many more about whom one could only hope, for whom one could wait endlessly. And now

this new trouble! The torn letter on the table tempted her. She was all alone. Perhaps, for the moment, she was glad of an excuse for not taking her post at the window with the flag. One has only just so much courage after all. And then too, for the moment, her heart was all for her uncle in his trouble.

"If I understood, perhaps I could help him," she whispered, with a quick glance at the closed door. And then, without further hesitation, she quickly picked up the scattered bits of paper, fitted them together flat on the table, and read in Gerouville's elegant flowing hand: "I regret infinitely, my dear friend, that you feel yourself in danger of forfeiting Villa Mirador, which you have pledged as security for a loan, the payment of which comes due tomorrow. Were it possible for me to come to your assistance, as you request, I certainly would be the first of your friends to respond to your appeal. But just at this time it happens that, to my great sorrow, I find myself unable to advance you any part of the sum you require. Accept, nevertheless, my friend, the assurances of my warmest devotion."

Villa Mirador in danger! That much she understood. Her uncle, her dearest friend in the world, was like to lose the one place on earth where he would be happy. It would kill him to leave Villa Mirador. Some way must be found. And alone, she made great promises, generously. She would help; she would save; she would rescue. What was her fortune for? It was not to be borne that her uncle should be unhappy—he who had spent all his love on her. Her eager heart was throbbing with love for him, even as—with a start and clutch at her throat—she moved toward the window in response to the distant, imperious call of trumpets, heard far up the road.

She shook out the flag.

"But we can't let him be wretched and old and sad!" she cried almost aloud, even as she gaily smiled a response to the cheery hail of passers-by, who loved the look of her standing there in the window with the scarlet, white, and gold of the brave old regimental colors.

CHAPTER XIX

IMPORTANT personages had arranged for the most important of all to spend the night before the entry at the Gerouville's chateau. They urged that a prince's valuable person should not be risked in what was certainly an unnecessary hardship—that the representatives of at least three great powers were waiting an audience—that Labor waited to welcome him—that his equerries had made complete arrangements for him to pass an evening of the sort dear to royalty and workingmen from time immemorial. But to one and all he returned the same answer. He told them he would remain with his men.

"I wonder if they can possibly understand," he murmured when the important personages had departed.

The length of the little village, where he was billeted, rose the sounds and the healthy scent of hardened fighting men, their guns and gear. Before his door, across two stacks of muskets, rested the tattered colors of the Guards. Behind the row of houses, gaunt, tough horses munched their forage on the picket-lines; men were busied overhauling their saddles and equipment; above the field kitchens hovered savory steams; troopers, in stained and dingy uniforms, but lean and hale and clear of eye, their tasks accomplished, took their rest in soldier fashion. For months he had shared their daily fortune of the field. They were his brothers, his friends, his children—these healthy, simple fellows, so frank in their weakness, so godlike in their humble virtues. He had led them to danger and to hard-won victory. With them he had suffered, had fought a common foe. His heart

had felt the thrill which comes when the trumpets bray the charge, the fierce sabres leap from their scabbards, and the thunder of the galloping horses roars across the plain toward the flaming guns. With these men he had shivered in the fog of a wet winter dawn, when the patrol feels its way through a dripping copse or down a winding, ambushed road, seeking for the waiting, hidden enemy. In his arms, he had held a score, hard hit, whose white or blood-smeared lips twitched out a smile of confidence ere the eyes glazed and closed. That boyish sentry over the colors, that grizzled sergeant-major, had rescued him from a losing *corps-á-corps* with a group of Imperial hussars, who surprised him in a farm. His comrades, his blood-brothers! Their common life of high adventure, joy, duty, and death! The very reek of them—so masculine and good! They had told him they would follow him to hell. They had kept their promise. Leave them? Ah, the morrow would come all too soon, with its life of ordered comfort and smug pettiness. Let him drink a last draught of this wine of comradeship.

“My men!” he whispered, with a beating heart. “My men!”

He rode in his worn field kit, with only his combat staff behind him. Here were no decked and gilded darlings of a gala day; here were men proud and weary. Cavalry next—a squadron, their lance tips gleaming; then the dogged infantry, backs straight under their heavy packs; then the rumbling guns and the train. The men had sprigs of greenery in the muzzles of their muskets; they smiled as defiant trumpets snarled out a fanfare to the rolling thunder of the war-drums. It was a dream that he rode in, through these shouting crowds which shrilled a welcome and acclaim. Over, done with, finished, the life of simplicity and strength! Yonder was

the city, waiting, and his palace all bedight with color. Old, crafty men were waiting with their intrigues and whisperings. Women were there—silken, rosy, flaming things, to lull or stir him. Tomorrow he would become once more an idol, a figure head, a legendary creature, the mere supporter of the Crown, seldom seen, remote, splendid, inaccessible, solitary.

And his people wondered that he did not smile, as he rode along the clamorous highway, through the gleaming sunshine. They considered that war had aged him.

He rode as in a dream. Soul stirring, soul shattering thoughts and emotions drowned him like a flood—a new set of feelings which followed hard on the tide of manly sorrows, rejoicings, fear, resolution, anger, regret, hope, submission and triumph, which for months had been his element. He saw but little as he rode along, his heart gripped fiercely.

His way down the road of triumph led him past an ancient house. Somebody, perhaps a girl, was waving a flag from a high window. But on the opposite side of the road there stood a woman dressed in black. The child in her arms flourished a flag also—a tiny thing made from scarlet, white, and yellow rags. The woman held up the child for him to see, and proudly smiled, though her eyes were red with tears, and her face was gray with weary waiting.

“I gave my husband. You can have this one too, so be it’s you who will lead him!” cried the woman shrilly. Her neighbors tried to hush her; but she made him hear her. “You are a *man!*” cried the widow, her head held high. Such a fine little flag as the baby flourished! He saluted; he called something to the woman—what he did not know, because his heart was full. He wished to

God that he could stop—take her with him—do something for this woman whose husband had died beside him. That was the way to talk! But, God, the responsibility, the—!

An adjutant pricked forward. "Sir, we are passing Villa Mirador. On this side. They are waving a flag. The young lady—"

What was the fool saying? He only heard a vague murmur. What a fine, brave woman that was with her baby! And here stands a veteran of former wars, bless his ancient heart, stiffly at salute.

"Major!"

"Yes, my general?"

"My compliments to the commander of the column, and we'll halt in five minutes. The troopers will dismount and the infantry fall out. Ten minutes' rest. It's hard for the men, and the horses too, marching on this paved roadway. What were you trying to say a moment ago?"

"A historic old house, sir," smiled the young officer, "with a lovely girl waving her country's flag. We've just passed it on the left."

"Indeed! Did you notice that widow, whose baby held the little flag? Find out her name for me."

The column passed by—men, horses, guns, trains. The girl at the window of Villa Mirador dropped back from her post.

"He was not there!" she whispered with dry lips.

Every rank, every group of cannoneers, each rider she had scanned with burning eyes, as they filed along the road below her. The old banner grew heavy in her hands; its faded, glorious folds lay heaped on the window sill, to be raised only a little, listlessly, as the last unit of marching men swung past her watch-tower.

"He was not there, uncle."

"There were so many," he urged gently. "So many all alike. How could you be sure?"

She could not tell him. Impossible, to reveal even to one who loved her, that call from her heart, that longing from all her being, which she had sent down to the marching column, summoning him, demanding that he answer, praying him to look at her. Had he been there, surely he would have felt her very nearness to him. No, he was dead. He was lying where he had fallen, a bullet through his heart.

She turned to the shaken old man at her side; she faced him with head flung back. She stiffened. A spot of flame burned hotly in her chalk white cheeks.

"But he died game!" she cried thrillingly, gathering the old flag to her breast. "Like a man!"

Alicia had come into the room. De Soulter was there too; so was the silent Blaise. The place seemed crowded —strangers all. They seemed to press upon her, to gape expectantly, hoped she would tell her secret, so they might gloat upon it stickily. They stared, as she fumbled to fold up the flag. "Let me do that for you," offered Blaise, stepping forward, and she surrendered the dim glory to him nervelessly. "Do close the window, my dear," begged Alicia. "Positively, we shall freeze to death." And she shut in the casement, averting her eyes as if she were avoiding the sight of lightning flashes. Only Tristram said nothing at all. He had left her, to go to his work table; he stood there, fingering the torn pieces of Gerouville's letter. "Very inspiring, the sight of our country's defenders," approved Oswald, neatly rolling his yellow gloves into a ball. "I—I was touched. Positively. I wish that my health had allowed me to be with them in the field." What was it that Aunt Alicia replied to the man? The girl tried to listen, to take her part in the general talk, even to laugh. She could not

let them know; she hid her sorrow like some secret treasure, precious and rare, locked up in her heart.

"Now what happens?" she demanded, bright eyed, as if the day was arranged to bring her nothing but happiness.

"Luncheon," smiled Alicia, "is due to occur in about half an hour. As soon," she explained to De Soulter, "as my household recovers from the excitement of the morning. The dear soldiers are so distracting. You'll stay of course, Oswald?"

"It would be the greatest pleasure," De Soulter returned, so promptly that one felt he had rehearsed the scene, with Alicia, already. He bent an inquiring eye on Eugenie Louise.

"Do stay," she urged nervously. "We—we can have a little dancing afterwards. So sorry that it was interrupted this morning."

"Delightful!" burst from the good man. "More than I deserve. Actually, I—." He turned to Tristram. "I say, are you going to be frightfully busy for the next fifteen minutes? I wanted to consult you, sir, while I was here. A little business."

Blaise slipped out of the room.

The poet caught his wife's eye, and murmured to Oswald what might pass for a hearty assent. He tried to telegraph Eugenie Louise that what he wanted above all things was to take her into his arms and comfort her as best an old uncle might. But already she was moving away, exchanging some laughing remark with her aunt, her gaiety almost boisterous. At the door, Alicia glanced back, hesitated, changed her mind, and went out, closing the door very softly.

"I—I hope I'm not interrupting you in something," began Oswald. For the poet had said nothing at all.

He was very busy storing the tattered standard in the old oak press.

"No, no, of course not. Well, that's over," sighed Tristram, locking the cabinet door. "God, what a *final* sound is the click of a key! Terrifying somehow." He stood for an instant as if undecided what to do, where to turn, next. In the brilliant winter sunshine flooding the room, Oswald noticed that he appeared much older and very worn. "Excuse me," he exclaimed, recovering himself with an effort. "Have a chair, Oswald."

"Would you mind if I stood up? When a man's as nervous as I am this morning, if he can walk about a bit, he—"

"Nervous? You?" The poet smiled. "Anything I can do?"

"If you'll do just one thing for me, I—by Jove, there's nothing I won't do for you!" cried Oswald in a tremendous burst of sound. He smote the back of a chair with his open hand. He had gone very pale—a horrid color altogether. His big eyes pleaded. "Anything!" he promised, mopping his brow with his fat white fingers.

Tristram raked together the fragments of Gerouville's letter with his finger tips. He arranged them in a neat little pile on his table, carefully. "Tell me," he invited.

Oswald looked toward the closed door, then drew a step nearer. He lowered himself over the writing table, so that his lips almost touched Tristram's ear. "I'm in love with Eugenie Louise!" he announced, and straightened up again with a jerk.

"What?"

"Yes, sir," he panted.

Tristram smiled awry. "You said you wanted to speak to me about business."

"Did I? By Jove, yes. Love—that sort of thing—

my affairs—should have come later. Selfish of me, very. But I couldn't hold in. Seeing her, you know. Just now. So happy and brilliant—”

“Of course you're in love with her,” said Tristram.

“But what I wanted to say first,” returned Oswald, scratching his ear, “is—you know. To express my sympathy.”

“What?” asked the astonished poet.

“Rodenheim,” whispered Oswald, leaning forward as if they shared a secret. “Oh, don't be angry!” he added, as Tristram made a sudden movement. “I—I didn't pry.”

“Where did you hear about—my affairs?”

“In town.”

“Not—here in this house?”

“My dear man,” asked Oswald with his head on one side, “who is there here at Villa Mirador, who'd tell me such things?”

And his big eyes were as bland as a cow's, as he uttered that sad untruth.

“It I thought that Blaise, or Alicia had—”

“Don't!” begged De Souter, as though the poet had pained him.

“Well, what about Rodenheim?” Was that Tristram's voice—that whining snarl?

“Only this,” laughed Oswald, “that Rodenheim is one of my particular dislikes. Confound the fellow! He expects you can't pay? But you'll fool him, of course. I—everybody'd hate to see Rodenheim—that sort of cattle—here in Villa Mirador. It would be fearfully rough on Eugenie Louise,” he added thoughtfully. “To be turned out, as one might say, from Villa Mirador.”

“I don't see any connection,” said the poet, fixing his eyes on the title of one of the books on his table. “But

thank you for your good wishes, Oswald. I'll manage, though—though it does look a bit dark just for the moment." Still the man looked down; still his voice sounded strange and strained. "And you say you're in love with Eugenie Louise," he added softly, in a murmur. "Of course. Like all of us." He hastened on, suppressing what Oswald started to suggest as a distinction. "The point," observed Tristram, "is what does *she* think of *you*?"

"She'd like me a lot, once she knew me," returned the hopeful one sturdily. "I—I'm a pretty good sort, sir. Truly. I—I could be so useful in the family," he offered. "And—and I've got a lot more money than anybody—"

"Ah, my dear Oswald, if riches—"

"What do you mean, shaking your head that way?"

"No good, my boy, unless she loves you."

"And that," said De Soulter, folding his arms impressively, "is what I want you to bring about."

It was as though he had flung down a challenge—no, as if he had issued an order which one could but obey. The overdressed, almost ridiculous figure took on a new air—he had something tyrannous about him and powerful.

The man in the arm chair stiffened as feeling a blow. Resentment, refusal, anger as at a mere impertinence choked him. A red flash gleamed in the kindly eyes. He made as if to rise.

"Please!" entreated De Soulter miserably, spreading wide his hands, as if to beg pardon for some fault. His lip quivered like a schoolboy's. "All I meant, sir, was that if she thought it would please her uncle, she'd marry me tomorrow. And I *do* dream so about her!"

"Humph!"

"Yes, sir."

"I like *that* about you, Oswald. Heartily."

"She'll do anything you ask her," the man repeated.

"I've said nothing to her personally. Formally, that is, I wanted first to enlist your sympathy, if that's the way to put it. First. It seemed the right thing to do. I'm such a damn methodical person, you know. But I'm wretched as hell about it, if you'll excuse the expression."

"Married!" wondered Tristram, his hands restless. "D'you know how much you're asking me?" he demanded with sudden truculence.

"I'd try mighty hard to make up the loss, sir," responded Oswald. "Somehow." There was a pause. "Anything." Another pause. "You've only to ask me."

"I couldn't ask you." The poet shook his head. "Nor could you repay me. In any way. The things don't go together."

The other leaned his weight on the table, propping himself on his arms. "Surely there's some burden I can help you carry, old friend. Just out of friendship. Queer," he smiled, "how I choose this time to speak of such matters. You'll think I'm wandering in the wits, but—"

The older man brushed aside Gerouville's letter. He laughed shortly, reaching his hands into the air. "Burdens!" he repeated. "Obliged to you, De Soulter. But I can't expect *you* to pay Rodenheim what I owe him, when—when my oldest friends have failed me."

"You don't mean it!"

"There's the letter from one of them. And I saw him personally, too. He said he was sorry, but—"

"How much is it?"

"What?"

"Your debt. Fifty thousand? Twenty-five?"

"How did you know?"

"Ho!" exclaimed Oswald, turning away with a laugh, not answering the question. "I'd owe you that myself on the score of gratitude."

Tristram glanced up suddenly, and was aware that Oswald was looking him straight in the eye. "Gratitude?" he babbled.

"Oh, for allowing me to spend so much time here, annoying you with my chatter," answered the fat man. He held out his hand. "Thanks for your assurance." There came another tiny pause. "For your promise to say a good word on my behalf to Eugenie Louise." Again he waited, wrung Tristram's cold hand with fervor, stepped away, fanned himself with his handkerchief, pulled down his wristbands. From somewhere in the house came the sound of a door closing, and of light footsteps on a polished floor. Tristram had risen. He had gone to the window. He stood there looking down, rubbing his jaw with his fingertips.

"Let me say again, sir, before I go, how like the devil I'd hate personally to see a fellow like Rodenheim take possession of this place of yours—this fine old house, begad, with all its associations—"

"He'll have it," said Tristram, "if I can't pay him to-morrow."

"By Jove, it's an anxious day for us both—eh? I—I had intended to ask for you niece's hand this afternoon, sir."

"It must be clearly understood, Oswald—clearly, mind you—that if I *do* say a good word for you to my niece—"

"You'll do it?" cried De Soulter, aiming his finger like a pistol at his stricken host.

Tristram did his best to straighten his figure, to take on again the dignity which had slipped from him like a discarded cloak. "Yes," he replied quickly. "Because," he added, "I'm convinced it would be for her happiness."

The other grinned. "And if I hand you a draft for twenty-five thousand crowns, within an hour after Eugenie Louise accepts me for her husband—"

"Uncle!" cried a clear young voice outside the door.
"May I come in?"

"Come in, my dear. Yes, Oswald, yes—?" And he laid hold of his visitor's arm. "Quick!"

"It's because I cordially dislike Rodenheim," replied De Soulter gleefully.

And then the two men laughed, comfortably. And as Eugenie Louise peeped in at the door, the oddly assorted pair were gaily shaking hands.

"Come in, my sweet," invited Tristram fondly, while Oswald effaced himself. "What a lot I've got to say to you!"

CHAPTER XX

FROM a reality so vivid as to color and submerge and shape anew all life, the man awoke to what people told him was reality.

Thrilling and poignant had been the reek, the stark, hard thrust of battle; vivid for a moment was the measured splendor of a triumph wherein all the world united to acclaim the victors and their leader. Colorful, frenzied crowds, with flags and music, hailed him—laced ambassadors presented tributes—little, bigeyed school girls offered flowers. Days and nights of apotheosis.

And then the change. Remote, in ancient panoply of gold and stiff brocade, jewelled, majestic, throned again, the man became once more a symbol, a something titular. Between him and the world was raised anew the ancient barriers: it was from far away, if ever, that he heard the joyous clamor and the sodden sighs, laments, and carolings common folk were uttering. Dim palaces contained him, as jewel caskets might enshrine a gem. Life pressed him down in velvet. What he did and said was carefully planned to be that which the occasion bade him. That which happened were not events in the life of a man, but of a nation. Old men whispered him sagely; glorious or clever women smiled and paraded, figures out of tales. A month? How long was it since that wintry day he had marched along the road, his troops in column? Here was spring once more.

And with the spring came other recollections—suddenly. Scenes from a past which war and glory had for the time effaced or dimmed, recurred when he was alone.

Hopes, wishes, divine discontents, mere human longings, all had been swept aside in him who had found in war—with its simplicities and splendors—the fulfillment of all his youth and blood had craved. Do not blame him for seeming to have been unfaithful. Inconstant you may call him, in that he heeded new calls when they came to him—but thus are all men fashioned in their hearts, sometimes one must believe, high and low and common. And here was a man above, or different from, the ordinary cut—one to whom all experiences in the life of the world came with the zest of high adventure, completely absorbing, each with demands on his heart which were not to be resisted. Incarnate in him was the spirit of youth and gallantry and quixotry; to him alone of his generation had it been given by the mysterious powers in charge of such matters, to open wide the gates of the Road-to-the-Mountains.

Legends about him are rife in every corner of the land, even today. He lives still, so pious people hope, eternally in a world he alone, with his magic, can keep from turning old and withered. Absurd—? Perhaps. But one never can be quite sure, after all.

There strolled to Villa Mirador one day in summer a young man selling ballads. Over his shoulder was slung an accordion, to the groans and wails of which nefarious contrivance he would sing, in a decent enough voice, the various lays—patriotic, sentimental, or (God forgive the author!) humorous—which he offered to a mildly interested market-place public in exchange for coppers or small silver. His trade was an odd one; but in the months following a war, what trade will a man not follow for the sake of earning any sort of a living? And in his wanderings up and down the land, the stroller learned much about men and women.

"Have you been doing this for long?" inquired Phoebe the housemaid, who confronts the singer on the doorstep. She had listened most appreciatively to a ditty about moonlight and a girl in love, which the fellow sang not badly at all, and (as she perceived twitteringly) wholly for her benefit. She felt interest and sympathy.

"No," he answered. "I'm quite a new hand."

"And you travel far?"

"I've come to Villa Mirador straight from Martinique."

"Where's that?"

"In the dooryard of Paradise." But he went on quickly.

"I've other songs, you know. All sorts. If you'll be good enough to tell some of the great ladies and gentlemen who live here that I await their pleasure, I'll give you a penny for yourself."

"A penny indeed! And why should I run such errands for you, when there's neither fine lady nor great gentlemen here, and won't be till the day after tomorrow?"

"What?" His hands clenched at his sides. On the day after tomorrow he had pledged his word that he would return to his prison-house. And not for a year could he come forth again.

"They are all gone," said Phoebe. "To England," she added before the fellow asked her. "They—master, mistress, and the young lady—have been gone away for near six months." And why she should have volunteered any information at all about her employers, I do not know, except that the ballad-monger had a taking way with him.

"In that case—," he began.

"You won't stay—even a minute longer?" invited pretty Phoebe, who was dreadfully lonely in the silent old house these days.

"I—I can't," returned the youth confusedly. "I must go on. Somewhere else. Far away, perhaps." He

raised a pair of eyes to Phoebe which begged a favor, irresistibly. "Will—will you tell them that I was here?"

De Soulter had gone with them. He followed in the company of Villa Mirador's household to England, because by now, you must understand, he was almost a member of it. Just how it happened, we do not know. But there is no record of Villa Mirador's having ever passed to the ownership of a Rodenheim. And in Oswald's diary in which, being a methodical man, he entered each day's doings in full, with reflections, we find in his flowing handsome hand, on the date when the conquering troops came home in triumph: "This is the happiest day of my life." And in the history of literature we know that it was during this winter that Tristram composed his strange, haunting, melancholy stanzas which he called "Death in the Garden"—a poet's lament, poignant and bitter, over a man's surrender to what appeared necessity. A dreary little elegy, written by a man who felt his strength going, his heart failing. If we wrote of the series of scenes which began with Tristram's interview with Oswald, included the poet's pitifully selfish, thinly veiled hint to his niece to come to the rescue of Villa Mirador by accepting the offer of Oswald's hand and fortune, and ended with the half hour Oswald spent with Eugenie Louise, we should have to call on our imagination, and that is a resource forbidden to the scientific historian, by all the rules. One could do pretty work however analyzing the feelings of Eugenie Louise. What a chance for the artist to picture the girl's acceptance of her lover's death, which meant the death of her dreams, her generous affection for Tristram now put to the test by the man's selfish weakness, her submission to what must have seemed a transcendent duty, at last her plucky endeavor to make the most of the ponderous, gasp-

ing dressy person to whom, closing her eyes against the sight of him, she extended her hand and submitted her cold white cheek! Here is material to tempt one indeed.

But one must resist. We must cling to our documents. And from these we learn only that Oswald De Souter now appears as Eugenie Louise's prospective husband, and that it was deemed advisable (perhaps to check up on Eugenie Louise's English inheritance) for the whole of Villa Mirador's household to spend the late winter and spring in London.

"Come back with some songs about weddings, and you may make a sale," said Phoebe, preparing to shut the door.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that," she answered.

"Who?"

"Who's like to be married out of this house but our young lady? It's plain that you are indeed a stranger."

"To whom?" he asked huskily.

"To the richest man in the world," laughed gossip Phoebe. "And the fattest." And she closed the door and went about her work.

Empty and cold the spring world into which he had escaped, so full of hope that very morning. Lost, the prize he had returned to claim. Bleak and solitary, leading nowhither, the road he must follow back to the city soon or late. Stark the coverts, and silent the trees, in Queens Wood where vainly he sought he knew not what of solace and beauty. Gray the dawn which found him at the door of the hidden house, where once a little queen had loved, laughed, and disappeared.

He had prepared it so carefully, all in secret, against the day when his treasure should return there with him. For days before, when he could manage it, he had carried thi-

ther this and that which they would need. The trifling, precious things all mocked him sadly now.

And he had sworn he would return in three days time.

Dark turned the spring morning also for the strange, fair woman at Chateau Gerouville. Her awakening had been delicious—brightened by the memory of happy dreams. But with her coffee was brought up a letter sent through the post by her husband.

“Monsieur is returning!” delightedly cried the little maid who brought the missive, seeing the smile which softened Marcelle’s blue eyes as she opened the letter.

“Yes.” She had read the first three lines. “Possibly,” she amended when she had finished the last three. She laid the note aside.

“It will be charming for madame to receive monsieur again,” the *femme de chambre* remarked compassionately, opening the curtains to let in the lilac-scented air. “Madame has been alone too long.”

“The—the scoundrel!” softly breathed Marcelle to herself with deep conviction, as she sipped her coffee. For this is what Gerouville wrote:

“Expect me home, my cherished angel, not later than Wednesday next. The good God knows that I would have returned ere this, had it been possible. But I am detained here in Paris by vastly important interests, which for the moment I cannot break off without serious embarrassment. Amuse thyself.”

“As he is doing!” was Marcelle’s sole comment, crunching her *brioche*, with good appetite. She felt an odd surprise that her cynicism did not shock her. To accept Gerouville’s infidelities, to take his lies, not with anger any more but with a tolerant scorn of their vulgarity and futility, had come with the passing years to seem natural.

A long time ago, when she had loved him, she had suffered bitterly. Now, when he had killed her love, she could comment on her husband's misbehavior to herself in the same tone which any of her women friends might use, between themselves.

But there must come an end. She must shape her life anew. She must have interests, diversions, occupations so absorbing and delightful that the nightmare of married life with Gerouville would sink into a limbo of forgetfulness, of unimportance. Now she could only say she did not care. But her heart and mind and senses must be filled with so many other matters that whether her husband came or went would be as indifferent to her as the journey of a summer cloud across her sun. Not that she expressed all this in words.

“I—I must get outdoors!” was all that Marcelle had to say. And so, directly after she had finished her breakfast she slipped out of her bed, and ordered the basket phaeton brought round in half an hour. She would drive to a dell she knew of in Queen's Wood, where columbines, white and purple, were to be found. She would search for other wildings, delicate and pure, and steep her very soul in their fresh spring sweetness. She would see naught that morning but what was new and young, shy and immaculate. She would hear naught but the lark at heaven's gate.

And, that is why Marcelle was fated to meet, on a road on the edge of the wood, a tall, clean youth, who strolled along with downcast eyes and stooping shoulders, playing most dolefully on an old accordion.

Her fat horse shied and reared at the apparition, then, surprised at his own agitation, stood still apologetically. The youth made no sign that he saw her. He was passing by on his side of the narrow road, still drawing dirge-like chords from the soul of his frightful instrument, and

crooning as he played a lament of which Marcelle could not catch a single word.

That any man not blind or paralytic should pass Marcelle De Gerouville without paying the accustomed tribute of at least a glance at her perfections was not to be heard of.

“Help!” she cried shrilly, as her horse kept trampling up and down, ferociously, his ears laid flat.

With a melodious groan the dirge—well, it did not come to an end so much as cease regretfully.

“What’s the matter?”

“This horse. Look at him.”

“How selfish he is,” sighed the singer bitterly, “to protest by his effervescence against another idiot’s sorrow!” He went to the horse’s head, laid hold of the cheek-straps, and patted the good beast’s neck. “Thus it is,” he complained, “that man is forced to cajole those who trouble his repose, give in to those who differ from his opinions, or smile with those who mock the feelings of his inmost heart. I resent your horse’s behavior, madame, exceedingly. Until this interruption spoiled it, I was enjoying a mood of the richest, blackest, most perfect melancholy ever dreamed.”

“Accept my apologies,” returned Marcelle, inclining her golden head. She did not look up again immediately. She was conscious of a sudden, and most ridiculous, trembling of her delicate limbs; she was aware that she had gone quite pale. But when the youth spoke, she had recognized him instantly. “I—I am obliged to you for your assistance, vagabond.”

“Vagabond?” Their eyes met. Then she was more sure of him than ever. “No!” declared the ballad-monger positively.

“What?” She could not be mistaken. Since that first day—that only day—months before, she had re-

tained a disturbing, vivid memory of his every trait. She wondered many things about him, many times. And here he was! Of course. Was not her heart beating?

But he evaded her look; he sought to move away, restlessly. "I'm not a vagabond," he muttered defiantly. "I—"

"Very well," she agreed. "Lie about yourself, if you choose. I'd only remind you that I found the vagabond an exceptionally nice young man."

"I dare say," returned the mourner. "None other could have attracted the attention of a lady who is as beautiful as she is highly born."

"Who are you then?"

"Madame," returned the stranger, coming to the side of the little carriage. "I am a person seeking oblivion. Across the past I am trying to draw an exceedingly tight and heavy veil. Pray be kind to me," he entreated passionately. "Forget your fancy that you see before you now the care-free, happy vagabond who once besieged the gates of Villa Mirador."

"Ah!" exclaimed Marcelle uncertainly.

He made his accordeon groan.

"Villa Mirador is not what it was, is it!" she remarked, with a certain confusion of grammer but plenitude of point. Her eyes smiled sweetly into his.

"Isn't it?"

"But weddings are always so thrilling!" she went on, ignoring his ignorance. "And dear Eugenie Louise is so blissfully happy!"

He said nothing at all.

"I don't see why I should retail these items concerning the life of the *beau monde* to an utter stranger, encountered by chance on the edge of Queen's Wood," she mused aloud, gathering her reins. "But I understand they are to be married within the month."

"Is that the truth?" the man shot at her with sudden truculence.

"Yes. Absolutely. Why?"

"And—and she's happy?" he asked after a tiny pause. "You understand, I'm merely trying to support my end of the conversation," he warned her. "For I don't know of whom you are speaking."

"My poor dear, whoever you are, the lady to whom I refer is perfectly radiant."

"The devil take all women!" he shouted, and kicked his accordeon into the bushes.

"All of us?" she smiled.

"I'll go there myself," he grumbled, boy-fashion. "And by the quickest route."

"Jump in," said Marcelle, making room beside her in the phaeton. "Let me drive you part way."

"I should be lacking in the very rudiments of politeness, if I declined so charming an invitation." He seated himself, and leaned back comfortably against the cushions. "Considering that you are a perfect stranger—," he began.

"Oh!" she protested, then considered rapidly. She nodded at him gaily, as if she knew some delicious secret. "Very well. So be it. That makes it much more of an adventure, doesn't it! Ah, the things that happen in Queen's Wood! Even to the best of us—!"

"As a stranger," said her passenger, resuming his interrupted remarks, "you show a surprising grasp of what I especially require at this particular moment of my very chequered career."

"As a woman," she answered, looking straight between her horse's ears, "I may be trusted to know what every man needs—occasionally."

"Oblivion," he sighed.

"Call it that," she responded evenly. "And to think,"

she murmured, as she urged her horse into a trot, "that I started out an hour ago with the sole purpose of gathering wild flowers, white and pure!"

They parted an hour later. "Good bye," said Marcelle, extending her slim, gloved hand.

"Beastly word, isn't it!"

"Because," she said, "it's so meaningless."

"Yes?"

"What do *you* think?"

"Tomorrow?" he demanded suddenly.

"Are there any columbines, or other wild flowers, on the main drive through the Wood?"

"Whole fields of them," he promised.

"I'm making a collection for my garden."

"And—you gather them yourself?"

"Usually."

"Tomorrow?" he repeated.

"I've had such ill success today that—"

"Three o'clock at the riven oak, midway along the main *allee*," the man suggested rapidly.

She considered. "Possibly," said Marcelle, as she drove from out of the shadows of the smiling forest.

CHAPTER XXI

THE passion of love had led Oswald De Souter into more than one strange path. He scarcely recognized himself nowadays. The routine of his life was sadly interrupted. He ventured greatly. He was indiscreet. He felt oftentimes that he had actually come near risking his health, and all for the sake of doing the imperious will of a young woman who was presently to marry him.

But in the long list of his daily sacrifices, there was not one which cost Oswald more dearly than his obedience to one perfectly insensate whim of Eugenie Louise's. This was, that he should go with her on walks. Expeditions. Across boggy meadows, over frightful hills, and through the always disagreeable depths of Queen's Wood. Not even London dispelled the memory of some of these heartbreaking excursions. They might have stayed quietly at home in elegant leisure; they might have shared in the perfumed privacy of Tristram's enchanting garden, now saved from the profanation of a Rodenheim. But the girl insisted on her daily hour of vigorous tramping. It was nothing that her aunt—sensible woman!—most cordially disapproved of these ramblings as being unladylike. It was enough that once, in a moment of recklessness, Oswald had declared himself enchanted with the idea of walking with his fiancée, for Eugenie Louise to drag him hither and yon, saying with the most engaging candor that she would do anything to make him happy. But he was game. That must be allowed him. And perhaps he was proud enough of the exquisite prize he had won, to wish to pleasure her all

he could. It is barely possible that, after repeated trials, he had begun to discover a certain charm in expeditions across country which had at first blush suggested nothing but mud-spattered boots, a tear in one's coat, and a desperately aching back.

But an end came, and this is the way of it.

On the very day after the little party had returned from the London jaunt, on a day of low hanging clouds, on a day when a thousand matters at Villa Mirador and at Oswald's own fine house demanded attention, Eugenie Louise had insisted on another of their cross-country journeys. She said she needed air. And presently Oswald found that he and she had covered a couple of brisk miles from the Villa, into a part of Queen's Wood whither its owner had never penetrated. For a moment they had lingered on their way through the park at a place which Eugenie Louise, by some quaint fancy, had named "Martinique." She had sighed as they left the place; but only shook her head when solicitously he had asked the reason. "Are you tired?" he had ventured to inquire. And she had answered, "A little, Oswald. But let's get on." They passed the place on the main road where Oswald had suffered at the hands of the brigands, and here she listened with eager and smiling attention as her man related (for the sixteenth time) all the details of his gallant fight against odds. They turned into a foot-path which wound blindly down the side of a hill.

"Where are we going now?" demanded Oswald, panting after his companion. She had fallen silent. She walked with her head drooped a bit, as if a shadow of sadness rested on her. She did not look at him as he spoke. She held aside a branch, which snapped back disagreeably, just missing him. It was a bit careless of Eugenie Louise, thought Oswald with a mild irritation

as he dodged the whiplike lash. He repeated his inquiry with some anxiety, for he observed the girl glance up toward the lowering clouds and hold out her hand.

"I thought I felt some rain," she murmured indifferently.

"No!" He was indignant. Rain would be the last touch of misery. They halted for consultation. Anxiously he looked about and listened. Away in the treetops, the wind was beginning to whisper threats. The sky was slaty. And even as they stood, there commenced a steady, sober patter of drops on the leaves.

"A shower," she commented. "It won't last."

"But in the mean time," he objected, "we shall get confoundedly wet. Beastly season, spring."

"Let's get on," she answered. "Perhaps we may find some sort of shelter."

"Poor darling!" he sighed compassionately, as he turned up his collar. "Was it Oswald's poor, damp lamb?"

If she shuddered, it was certainly because already her dress had begun to cling clammily to her shoulders, and her slim, silken ankles were very, very cold. But she kept steadily forward down the little hillside track, ever deeper in the Wood, almost (one would say) as though she had some real destination in view. Oswald was positive that once he heard her laugh, in spite of her uncomfortable state. Twice, when by superhuman efforts he caught up with her at a turn of the trail, he heard his sweetheart sigh. She quickened her pace, too. She never once halted until, after a horrid slip and scramble down an especially devilish slope, they arrived without warning before the door of what appeared to be a tiny, old stone house. Completely covered with creepers, and shadowed by the lower branches of a gigantic oak, the

place could have been passed by anybody at midday without being seen. There was something amazing in the girl's quick sight which had detected, by the merest chance, this strangest and most unexpected of woodland shelters.

The rain was driving down in floods by now. But here, at the very threshold of shelter, Eugenie Louise drew back as if overcome by a sudden fear. For an instant she covered her eyes with her hands, then straightened herself resolutely.

"Allow me," offered Oswald, stepping forward. He tapped discreetly at the little door, and bent his head to listen. He looked up in some dismay. Apparently," he reported, "the owner is not at home."

"No," she whispered bleakly. "No."

"This *is* disconcerting." He knocked again more loudly. "It is indeed very wet," he said, "but one naturally hesitates before—"

"Would you have me drown before your very eyes?" she demanded in tragic tones. "Kick the door down, if you have to."

"Oh, my dear—!" He was horrified.

But as if on a sudden resolution, the girl reached past him to try the catch, quite without ceremony. It yielded. The door opened, and they were blown into the strangest little room that Oswald had ever beheld. "This is no time for manners," observed the girl, dripping dismally. "No, thank you," she added, as Oswald made haste to bring forward a chair. "It's warmer, standing."

"I wonder where the owner can be," said Oswald looking round.

"Ah—!" She sighed, and closed her eyes, turning away.

"But—but he must have been here recently," said De Soulter. "See, the clock is going."

"It—it's not possible!" she gasped. "Oh, Oswald, why did we come here? Why—oh, if—"

"If the owner *does* return, I feel sure we can give him a reasonable and acceptable explanation of our presence."

She laughed with a queer note of derision.

"Poor, dear child!" exclaimed the hero of our story compassionately, holding out his arms. "Come!"

But she shook her dark head, alleging that she could not embrace her betrothed with anything like proper fervor while ice water was coursing down her back. And in the same breath, with a stolen glance about the place, which was oddly curious and timorous, she asked of Oswald if he knew where they were. And when he gave a reply which was dreadfully vague, she sighed again, resignedly. "And I'm depending on you to be my guide through life!" murmured Eugenie Louise despondently.

"Er—following that little path," he said, "and—er—running, as we did, rather confused me. I'm more at home on a decent street, where one can ask one's way of a policeman. But in these God-forsaken woods—"

"They're not God-forsaken," she contradicted indignantly. "They are alive with fairies. And I adore nature when it isn't raining. Oswald darling," she continued after a slight pause, looking thoughtfully at her betrothed, who had seated himself on the edge of a chair, "don't you think you might do *something* to help your precious out of this predicament?"

"I can't change the weather."

"But I want to change my clothes."

"It cuts me to the heart to see my darling so uncomfortable."

"Unless she gets dry and warm—soon," declared Eugenie Louise very positively, "you won't have any

darling at all." She hesitated, then faced him with a new light in her eyes. She drew a long breath before she spoke; and when she spoke, there was a little shake in her voice—queer in her, very! "I may be asking more than my station in life as your future wife allows, Oswald," said Eugenie Louise. "But I must—ask it."

"Anything!"

Again she hesitated. "Will you return to the Villa, and send the pony-cart here to me with some dry clothes?"

He made all the objections which you know Oswald would naturally make. To which she returned the assurance that he was not doing her one bit of good by staying with her—that if it were fairies who lived in the little house (which seemed very likely), she would amuse herself by watching them—if a woman, she would borrow some clothes—if a man—

"Aha!" warned Oswald sagely. "The average man would—"

"If an *average* man should appear," said Eugenie Louise with a curl of her lip, "I should bolt the door and scream unceasingly till you came and rescued me. Anybody above the average—well, it is impossible," she ended with a sigh.

"I—I don't *want* to leave you," repeated Oswald with a look at the weather. Outside, the rain had veiled the dell with silver; the branches of the old oak lashed in the gale.

"I want to be left! And to think, this is the first request I've ever made of him!" sighed Eugenie Louise, as she sat down in a sodden, chilly heap. To which Oswald replied, with some spirit, that, being a mere female, she should trust his better judgment; which made her deny that she was a mere female; which induced Oswald to observe, as he rose from his chair in majesty, that for a young person who was soon to become his wife she

showed a most deplorable animation. "I don't!" she cried, stamping her foot which squelched horridly in her shoe. "All I ask is that you shall fetch me some dry clothes, and you begin lecturing me on the duties of motherhood—wifehood, I mean. Oh, but I'm wretched!"

He moved toward the door. "I am pained," said Oswald, "that the woman who is to be my wife should show such temper."

"And I'm grieved that the man who is to be my husband —." She stopped short at the word. She stared in front of her, as at a vision, her arms hanging down. "Husband!" she repeated. "Day and night! And we'll live to be a hundred."

"I am going," said De Soulter, opening the door, "against my better judgment." The rain drove in gustily. "I'll bring the pony cart and your clothes."

"That's better," she encouraged. "Be sure to wrap your throat up warmly, Oswald dear," she added as he passed out into the blinding, stinging storm. Springing to her feet, she shot the bolt of the door. She stood there, with her eyes very bright, listening.

"Anybody home?" she whispered softly. But there came no answer, though she waited for a long minute eagerly. "I'm truly frightfully wet," she added candidly. "But if anybody came? Ah, but there won't," she sighed. "That's over. He did not hear me, when I called. He never, never—!" She raised her head defiantly. "What's past is past, silly girl!" she scolded hardily. "But—it was very sweet, dear Crookfinger, ever so long ago!" cried Eugenie Louise, as if he could hear her still—he, who was lying dead on a battle field, he who had first led her to the cottage, where once a little queen had found her happiness. "And now as to some clothes—eh?" She considered. It would be more than an hour before Oswald could possibly return. An hour all to

herself in this place! It would be the last time. She looked out into the storm, and thanked it for its violence, before setting about finding something—anything—even velveteens, for instance, which would be more comfortable than the drenched, flimsy rags which hung about her now so dismally.

“A stranger lives here now,” she said with decision. It was with what might be called a shy audacity that she started to look about the place where, for a day, she had been so very happy. Why had she come back? She wondered at her folly. It is not good to say good-bye ceremoniously. She had fancied that every moment spent in the old room was going to awake a little thrill of poignant memory; it was going to be even amusing—these secret farewells to an old love, while the new and official lover stood by and did not understand.

But now—things were not working out. Perhaps the silence and the chill and the gathering darkness clouded her mood and spoiled her day. She found that it was very sad to think again of Crookfinger. She was sorry she had come. She was so chilly that she very soon found herself busily searching, not for sentimental and tender memories, but for practical comforts.

A high-backed settle stood by the fireplace. Behind it, she remembered, there was a clothes press. It was barely possible that the new tenant—aha! This was not so bad. Opening the door, she searched somewhat blindly in a confusion of garments hanging in the press. She was rewarded by dragging forth a heavy blue coat of pilot-cloth like a sailor’s peajacket, a pair of loose white trousers, and furry slippers which appealed to her as sent expressly by the saint who cares for girls with cold, wet feet. She also found a shirt, just like the one Crookfinger gave her long ago.

One glance to make sure that the door was truly

bolted, and she lost no time. Happily she freed herself from the clinging damp embrace of her silks and muslins; round about her feet they lay discarded and abhorred. Stooping, she rid herself of her stockings also; she sprang upright at some fancied step outside the cabin, to listen wide-eyed, hands across her firm young breasts, white and gleaming vividly alive, in the warm dusk of the little room. Oswald? Impossible, so soon. Her dark eyes kindled gaily, as the thought of his entrance at this critical moment flashed to her. I should add, for her credit, that she flushed right prettily too. But she laughed aloud at the vision of Oswald's startled face, could the last of the De Souters see her as she was just then.

“Decidedly,” said Eugenie Louise, as the big clock boomed four just then sonorously, “I’d best make haste, for this is no spectacle for the eyes of a modest man.” And so she quickly slipped into the shirt and trousers, making the latter fast round her slim waist with a thong of deerskin. Her white feet she buried in the delicious slippers; she pulled on the peajacket, which reached almost to her knees, neatly rolled up the bottoms of the trouser legs and the sleeves, and was perfectly enchanted with the general result. Out of pity for the faithful and pathetic shoes she had discarded, she hung them one over the top of each andiron before the fireplace. She pretended for their sake there was a fire at which the poor things could dry themselves a bit. But her other belongings she made into a sorry bundle of dampness—just as once before, placing it on the settle where she would see it when it came time to take the pony cart home again. She had done all this, when she became aware that the sound of the spring rain had ceased. She opened the door, cautiously at first, then widely, as she saw the sun beginning to gleam palely through the broken clouds. She was

standing in the doorway, hoping against hope for the coming of—Oswald, of course, when there came to her the sound of voices—a man's and a woman's. With beating heart, with a throb of delight and a chill of dismay, she looked in the direction she herself had followed to reach the house. And there, not fifty yards away, she saw that which sent her back into the house in a hurry.

Side by side down the hill-side path came Crookfinger and Marcelle.

Desperately she sought a hiding place. Quick as a flash she picked up her bundle of clothes. For a second she stood, trapped and scared, till the chime of the big clock warned of the quarter hour. And in another instant, acting on this friendliest of hints she had ensconced herself within the clock's capacious case, pulling shut the door as best she might.

"This is strange," exclaimed Crookfinger, as he strode up to the open door. His companion entered without ceremony, hastily.

"Are we safe here?" she panted.

"I confess I can't understand how the door came unfastened," he answered, looking keenly about him. "I—"

"Has anybody been here? There's nobody about now? You're positive?" she begged. "I'm so nervous, I—"

"There's nobody here but you and I," he promised heartily.

"And quite enough," sighed the blonde Marcelle. She dropped into a chair and pulled off her hat. "That's the worst of romance," she complained with bitterness. "If you are married and romantic, you're fated to be scared every minute of the day and night."

But he reassured her handsomely. After all, there was no harm in her taking shelter from the shower in this cabin of his; after all, it was by chance that she had

come to Queen's Wood that afternoon. She had not intended to meet him, declared Crookfinger roundly. What wrong had she done? All this he declaimed, like a piece he had learned by heart. And Marcelle listened to his fluent recitation with downcast eyes, while a quaintly incredulous smile carved the curve of her lips into a parody of mirth not nice to see. She was very white.

"Dear liar that you are!" she murmured, when the vagabond had finished.

"But we've done no wrong," he insisted.

She shrugged disdainfully. It was as though there passed before her in procession all the circumstances, all the thoughts of the past year. She remembered the day her husband—the white faced, narrow chinned sneak, had cynically laughed when she told him he might push her too far. She thought of the days of chilly rain in her childless house, of her nights of vague longings, of mornings when she awoke to a renewed round of empty duties and sterile, so-called pleasures, of desires unfulfilled, of happiness denied. She lived again the hour when her husband had reminded her that she was his property, to treat as he chose—because he was so powerful, being rich, while she was utterly dependent, being penniless. There recurred to her other hours, when idle and careless, she had sought distraction and contrasts—all dust and bitter in the mouth. Marcelle recalled the hour when she saw lying by the roadside the figure, with glowing eyes and tender smile, of the stripling who appeared to have been sent into her empty life from nowhere—but for whose love she had been waiting (so said her heart and senses, honestly), since she was a slip of a girl. She thought of the magical hours she had spent with him in fancy, their souls confounded, their beings fused.

"You believe that?" she smiled, not looking at him. Then as he made no answer, her blue eyes swept him with a cold blaze. "I dare say you're laughing at me for my folly, even as you stand there. Ah!" With a harsh little cry in her round throat, she sprang up and stood rigid for a moment, her white face buried in her hands with the long fingers.

He stammered protests. When she faced him, she was calm again. But the color was high in her cheeks as she moved close to him; one would sense a promise, an offer, a supplication in the pose of her delicate, sinuous body, as her knee touched his. Her eyes were starry. They searched his face. Slowly her hands crept up till they took hold of his two arms.

"You think me mad?" she accused, her lips barely moving. "Perhaps. Mad to come to Queen's Wood today. Wrong? Ah, man, but I've sinned with you a score of times. In fancy. In hope. And now I've said what no woman ever says. Do you hate me for it? Well, I'll take even your hate, if only—"

Her head dropped on his broad breast. Her arm, like a smooth, warm snake, stole round his shoulders. Against him he felt the quivering life of her body.

"Kiss me!" she whispered, lifting her velvety lips. "You make me do dreadful things. But you excite—I cannot help it, when you kiss me like that. I—"

She made him drunk. He stopped to drain from her scarlet mouth another draught of the drug she offered him. She gave him of her best, passionately, each gift from her lips an entreaty that he should demand still richer treasures. He was aware presently that she was looking up at him gravely.

"It can't be wrong to love a man like you," Marcelle was saying. "As I do."

Then she turned from him, as he stood there blind and

swaying. It was almost with an air of triumph that she turned away. Her slim hands went up to adjust a stray coil of her golden hair.

"So much for that!" she cried with a fierce gaiety. "Now entertain me prettily, you—rover. Pretend—shall we? I've come to call. You are an artist who has been painting my portrait. The pose," she smiled bleakly over her shoulder, lowering her eyes beneath the long lashes, "is finished. Enchant me with polite nothings, while I wait for my carriage."

"Yes—yes," he stammered, still drunk with what she had given him. "To be sure."

"I'll have tea, if you please," she directed airily. "And lights. I hate this shadowy hour of the day."

A pair of guttered candles stood on the chimney piece. She moved away to the chair she had quitted. The vagabond, striking a light from his tinder-box with hands that shook, went toward the yawning fireplace. He touched the match to the drooping wicks; he bent down to stir the smouldering fire into life. And then he saw, impudently cocked on the tops of the andirons, a pair of small wet shoes.

"Men are so faithless!" spoke the beauty, stretched in the armchair idly, as with exceeding haste her host collected the flaunting footgear, with his back to her. "I wonder what you are thinking of." She leaned back against the cushions, crossing her silken knees. "Before I came for tea, what other woman was here for luncheon?"

He opened the fireside settle, and hastily stowed away what he had discovered. He made a great parade of getting out some light wood and shavings for kindling the fire. He was desperately busy. "Ho!" he answered scornfully. "Come, that's impossible, Marcelle. Another girl indeed—!" And he slammed down the lid of the settle with a crash which made her start.

"Have you really forgotten Eugenie Louise?"

He did not look round. He was busy now arranging the kindling in the fireplace.

"Eugenie Louise has forgotten me," he answered presently, standing up again. He faced round. He saw Marcelle stretched in the chair. Their eyes met. She smiled a dare at him, then lowered her eyes with a shiver.

Her pale hands gripped the arms of the chair as she averted her blonde head. But it was as if she made him come to her by witchcraft. His voice was altered, as he stood over her, as he caught up one of her hands in his. "Ah, Marcelle!" he cried hoarsely. "You wonderful woman! Don't you know—yes, you do—that here, in your presence, when you tell me you love me—"

She leaned up to him ardently. "Yes," she said, "I do love you, vagabond."

And the big clock, there in the corner, struck some crazy hour.

"What's that?" She pushed him away.

He glanced over his shoulder, still holding her hand. "It sounded like the clock," observed the vagabond. "But—but it's quiet again now."

"I'm frightened. Say you love me. Say it."

"Marcelle!" The man stooped close to breathe once more of her sweetness. "Marcelle—!"

Again the clock banged.

"It's a ghost!" cried Marcelle, with a cry, springing to her feet.

"Ghost—?"

"Queen's Wood!" gasped the beauty.

"Bang, bang, bang, bang!" went the ancient timepiece furiously.

"I am afraid. Let me out of here!" Blindly Marcelle sped to the door, as the man, with an imprecation, strode

across the room to the corner where stood the clock.
“Don’t touch it, vagabond. I—”

But in a rage he wrenched open the door of the case. With another oath, he grasped the huddled, muffled little shape he found wedged inside it; he spun it out into the middle of the room—a carnival figure in clothes a mile too wide, which pulled up the great coat till its face was wholly hidden.

“Help!” called Marcelle at sight of the apparition. “Oh, traitor!” she wailed to the world in general. And before the distracted vagabond, holding fast to his prize, could make a move to arrest her, the beauty fled from the house into the gathering twilight.

CHAPTER XXII

How she won her desperate way up the wood-path—why she was not led astray ten times over by the unchancy creatures which live in Queen's Wood—by what means she at length broke through a ferny, birch-grown covert to find herself at the side of the principal *allee*—of all this Marcelle never told. So far as we know, she resisted every temptation to make a good story out of her escape from the ghost-haunted forest; and this in itself was admirable in her. But, such was her most charming modesty and shrinking from self-advertisement, Marcelle actually went so far, in the matter of her afternoon adventures, as assiduously to spread the impression that she had not been in Queen's Wood at all.

Such at least was the idea she conveyed to Tylendonck of the Royal Rurals. Astride of Jet, with afternoon tea aglow beneath his ribs and warmed besides by the importance of the orders in his dispatch case strapped to the saddle, Tylendonck was making the best of his way along the road in the direction of the constabulary headquarters next beyond his own, when he perceived approaching through the gathering twilight a woman's figure. A right good-looking woman she was, too, and young, or his policeman's eyes deceived him. So he gathered his reins more smartly, straightened his figure a bit, and brought Jet down to a walk, as became a trooper of his gallant corps in sight of the enemy. But hardly had he completed these dispositions, before he halted his horse altogether. He stared and stared again. And presently Tylendonck was forced to acknowledge, rue-

fully, that in some unaccountable way his eyes had played him false after all. Five seconds before, he had seen something on the road ahead which was youthful, feminine, graceful, and solitary. Now the wet road stretched before him utterly empty.

"It isn't possible!" declared Tylendonck, in the words of every true soldier confronted by a happening not covered by field service regulations. "Well, I'm damned!" confessed the fallible and humble human beneath the soldier's gallant trappings. "Come out o' that!" ordered the brisk and peremptory voice of the Royal Rural, as a rustle in the roadside thicket smote his attentive ear. "I see you. Don't try to hide from *me*, woman."

"To hear you talk," remarked Marcelle, emerging from the refuge into which she had plunged the moment she had seen the bold rider, "one would think I was trying to escape observation."

In spite of her sadly bedraggled state—for wet and wind and a walk through the woods had done their worst—she managed easily to appear the elegant, leisurely lady who graced a great house. She was splendid. Race told. She had even remembered to cull from the thicket, in which she had been cowering, a spray of wild honeysuckle. Nonchalantly she held it up, to try the effect of its grace and color against the horse's long blank face. Much to Jet's embarrassment.

"Don't you know me, imbecile?" Marcelle asked impatiently of the staring gendarme.

"Anywhere but in Queen's Wood, with night coming on, I should say you were Madame De Gerouville. But here—"

"I am a botanist," announced the lady coolly.

"A—?" He scratched an ear. "Remember," cautioned Tylendonck rapidly, "that anything you say against yourself will be used against you at your trial."

"The Royal Rurals," she returned, have more important duties than the arrest of lonely and innocent females like myself. As for my being a botanist—"

"Exactly!" he shot at her. "Anarchist—botanist—Calvinist, the whole alphabet down to unionist and Zionist—is enemies of the State"—he saluted—"to be took up on sight."

"You are fearfully tedious, Tylendonck," she sighed. "You know quite well that I am Madame De Gerouville. But for reasons which you would not understand, you did not see me here in Queen's Wood this afternoon. Or stay!" she added, opening her bag, to which she had clung all through her many adventures. "Here is a reason which all men understand everywhere. For the Royal Rural pension fund," she said, slipping a coin into the broad hand which descended automatically from its hold on the bridle. "Now go about your business, while I continue my walk home. I came out to pick woodland flowers and got caught in the rain. I've heard of you for months, Tylendonck as a trooper who deserved to be a sergeant-major at least, and I shall certainly speak of you to my husband, who possesses, as you know, enormous influence. I see you're in field equipment," she added, remarking the man's uniform and accoutrements. "That means you're on an important mission?"

He nodded sagely. And the thought smote him that possibly he had lingered too long by the wayside. "Dispatches," he answered briefly, tapping his saddlebag. "But I've always time for real police work," he added. "Any loiterers, wastrels, runagates, or vagabonds—"

"What—?"

"Are neatly and expeditiously apprehended. Now that the war is over, we can return to normalcy."

She appeared to be considering some matter of im-

portance. And presently she said that she wished she had had the good fortune to meet with the Royal Rural half an hour sooner. She had been considerably frightened, and excessively annoyed, by a youngish scoundrel, who—”

“Here? In Queen’s Wood?” exclaimed the horrified constable.

“Over yonder,” she indicated vaguely. “I’ve already told you that I haven’t been in Queen’s Wood all afternoon.”

“Exactly. I forgot.”

“Don’t. That’s what I paid you for.”

“But this vagabond, madame—?”

“Oh, a brute!” she shuddered.

“The same rogue who attacked Mr. De Soulter months ago, I’ll be bound!” cried Tylendonck excitedly. “Could you describe him, madame?”

She shrugged. “Is it worth while? You can’t tarry for such small game tonight. Even if you could ever find the hidden house in the woods where—”

“A hidden house, madame? Not far from here. I’ll look into it.”

“You mean that you’ll actually go there alone? Oh, it wouldn’t be safe, Tylendonck. I couldn’t dream of asking you to risk your life, just for the sake of arresting—”

“Consider it done,” he interrupted briefly.

“But the delivery of your dispatches?”

“Must wait, madame. There’s a reward standing for the arrest of the De Soulter miscreant.”

“How much?”

He named the sum which Oswald had offered.

“That’s not bad,” approved Marcelle. “But let me tell you something, trooper.” She came close to his side, and looked up into his face with a candid, sunny

smile. "If you catch the man, and kill him," said Marcelle, "I'll let you kiss me, Tylendonck."

"Show me the way," was all the gendarme's answer, as he dismounted and drew a pistol from the holster.

CHAPTER XXIII

WOUNDED and furious, Marcelle had not flung from the house in the woods before Crookfinger exploded volleys of rage on the head of the wight who winced beneath his grasp.

"And you've got my clothes on, too!" he accused, after laying every other crime at his victim's feet, which were still encased in the furry slippers. "Wait till I've done with you, little devil. I'll make you sorry you came."

"I'm sorry already," a small and muffled voice replied from the depths of the great-coat.

"What? Who are you anyhow?"

"An—an outcast!"

"Damned little rat!" Blindly he tore at the enveloping folds of the coat, fuming. But suddenly two small hands stripped back the collar; the intruder raised a stormy, glowing face; and there before the vagabond, at the length of his arm, stood the one person in all the kingdom he least expected to see. She eyed him scornfully, trying to curl her tender, trembling lip. "You —!" was all he could gasp, releasing her.

"No!" decaled the apparition hotly. "I'm a stranger. I took refuge here from the storm. That was my only reason for coming. The only single one. I was a most unwilling witness of your—your love-passages. They were revolting. Now, I'm going." And she swept away to the door, her proud little head carried very, very high. But halfway she had to stop, because one of the big slippers dropped off. "Curse!" cried the intruder heartily, as she stooped to recover it.

“Stop!”

“No!”

“But you can’t go away like that,” objected the master of the house unsteadily.

“Darkness has no terrors.”

“But you’re wearing my clothes.”

“They will be returned to you, neatly pressed, tomorrow. I apologize for taking them. But I was drenched to my—well, thoroughly.” She halted at the door and looked back. “Good bye,” said Eugenie Louise. And she added severely: “I don’t see how you can look me in the eye.”

“Why not?” he inquired, with a clang in his voice like an alarm bell.

She advanced a mutinous chin, but dropped her eyes. “You—you never even wrote to me.”

“I did!” he replied quickly. “From the front.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “It is very strange that I never received your—letter. And now you make violent love to a perfectly dreadful person. And you meant it, too,” she shot at him. “Your behavior was not only heartless, it was unmannerly.”

“It was neither,” came his prompt, defiant rejoinder. The man’s face had darkened; the light was gone from his eyes. In the dim candle-glow, his figure bulked threatening and severe. His hands were clenched at his sides. “Just now, you called yourself a stranger,” he reminded her briefly, his broad chest laboring. It makes no difference to you, if I make love to this woman or to another.”

“None whatever,” she agreed hastily. “None.”

But he continued as if he had not heard her. She had never heard him speak like this before. His voice was low and harsh; it shook with an emotion he was at no pains to conceal. His words came in a flood, drowning her.

"Once I gave all my love—my very best—to a girl who was everything in life to me. Then the war took me—separated me from her. I came back—I went instantly to seek her. And I found she had tossed away my love like a withered weed."

"Did she?"

He flung out his arms as if to push away the recollections which assailed him. "When I was away, she turned to another man," he cried bitterly. "When I was in the army. Fighting. She chose somebody else. And from that moment I've been free, so far as she's concerned," he declared. "Free to love all the women in the world."

"Turk!" she murmured disdainfully.

"As you like." He took a turn away from her. He fingered for some wild reason, for just a second, the little pocket pistol which lay on the table, then flung it down with a laugh as at some ridiculous absurdity. "Nonsense!" She watched him with a sharp intake of her breath. Then he returned to her. And as if by some uncanny magic, all his black mood vanished. He was smiling, easy, whimsical. "And now that everything is understood," said the master of the little house good-temperedly, "let me ask that the next time you overhear me entertaining a friend, you don't interrupt me. And you're welcome to the clothes. Is there anything else I can do to make you comfortable?"

She shook her dark head. "Nothing. You've done all you ever can do for me."

"Before you go—"

"Speak quickly."

"Tell me," he inquired, "are you happy, engaged to De Soulter?"

"Thrilled!" declared Eugenie Louise with emphasis.

"Now we speak of him—may I ask where De Soulter may be at the present moment?"

She inclined her head gravely. "My future partner on life's highway has gone, very kindly, to fetch me some dry clothes, and a carriage in which to drive me home. I expect him any minute."

"In that case, why run away?"

"I'm not!" she flamed indignantly. "I am merely taking my departure. There's a difference. I find it unpleasant to linger on the scene of your—your amours. But since you claim the right to make love to anybody—"

He nodded positively.

"And since," she went on meditatively, "I am a mere wayfarer—"

"Exactly," he agreed. "A perfect stranger. Nobody I have ever seen before. Do sit down, and wait for your—your lover, comfortably." So saying, he pushed forward a chair to a place in front of the hearth, and with a gesture invited her to accept it. "Please!" said Crook-finger with a bow.

"A woman always votes against her better judgment," sighed Eugenie Louise, as she disposed herself primly in the chair. "I'm fully aware that for me to sit here is very indelicate, most unseemly, highly injudicious."

"It—it's dear in you!" burst from the man with amazing fervor. "But I'm forgetting the hospitality due all wayfarers. You seem damp and dismal. May I offer you—?"

"I confess to being a *little* chilled," sighed the outcast, as the man produced a quaint flask and two glasses from the cupboard. "I wish I had a shawl."

"We'll pretend."

Her sombre eyes lighted. "Pretend?" she echoed, catching at the familiar word. Then she bit her lip impatiently. I—I don't know what you can possibly mean," asserted Eugenie Louise with dignity. "What's

this?" she inquired doubtfully, taking the tiny glass of shimmering crystal cordial.

"It is called "Secrets of the Heart,"" smiled her host. "It's distilled from the most secret herbs in Queen's Wood. Fairies gather them by moonlight." He raised his glass. "To your future happiness," said the vagabond, very steadily.

She matched his coolness. She looked at him with a smile of mere good manners. "Thanks. And may *you* win from life—everything you hope for."

"Everything?" he repeated heavily.

"Everything worth while," she amended a bit hastily. "Reputation—fame—success—lots of money."

"All that men live for, you mean."

"Ah, you should know as to that." She rose. Since our conversation may be interrupted at any moment—"

"By whom?" he interrupted jeeringly. "De Soulter?"

"Marcelle," she sent back, "more likely."

He shook his head. "She won't come back," he laughed shortly, setting down his glass.

"Well, if you feel impelled to go to *her*, pray don't let *me* detain you a moment. A moment."

"You're not."

She flushed hotly. "I should have known. Presumptuous of me. But girls think they're *so* important to a man. They're not, really, are they! For instance, I've been out of your thoughts for ever so long. But then," she added consolingly to herself, "I—I never think of you."

"Tell me about De Soulter," said the man, by way of answer.

She sighed blissfully at mention of the name. "Oh, he's admirable! But—you know what it is to be in love."

"Yes."

"Tell me about Marcelle," she suggested. "Turn and turn about."

"I don't need to tell you that she's beautiful," said Crookfinger slowly.

"Really—!" She raised her eyebrows in pretty doubt.

"There's a strange, wild fire that smoulders in her eyes" the man declaimed recklessly, but watching, watching.

"Indeed!"

"And—she's lonely. And so was I—"

"How very, very sad!"

"And on the whole," concluded Crookfinger, "I utterly detest Marcelle."

"What?" She sat up straight.

"Ah, my dear, it isn't love that one feels for a woman like Marcelle. It isn't real love," he asserted blindly. How did it come about that by now he was on one knee before her?

"Love is—beautiful," the girl said, looking past him.

"Love is affection—tender and sweet—"

"Love is—well, you know it when it comes to you all right," said Eugenie Louise.

"Bob—!"

"No!" she cried, half rising, making as if to thrust him away with her hands. But he caught them in his. "Oh—oh, I do wish Oswald would make haste!"

"Confound Oswald! Listen to me."

She considered. She sighed resignedly. "I can't help listening without appearing very, very rude. So—"

"Bob!" he cried again, tremulous, eager. "Little, dear companion of—"

But she sprang to her feet with a little, choked cry of pain. She dragged her hands free. She drew back a step, staring at him.

"No, I say!" she repeated blindly. "It's not the same. That was only for—for a day. It never can happen again. We—"

"Let me prove to you I *am* the same!" the man cried desperately. "All our separation—Marcelle, De Soulter—all this wretchedness—nothing, dear, nothing! Now that you're here again—with me—"

"How can I tell?" she murmured pitifully. "Who are you—now?"

A resounding knock crashed against the door.

"Open in the name of the law!" shouted a heavy voice; and once more the panels quivered under the blow the visitor drove against them. "Open, you scoundrel! You're caught."

"Scoundrel—?" repeated Eugenie Louise in a whisper, eagerly. But the man did not answer. He made no move, save to lay a heavy hand on the girl's arm to hold her still. Swiftly he glanced here and there, as if seeking a possible way of escape, or for some hiding place. But there was no chance. Again sounded an imperious summons.

"Let him in!" whispered Eugenie Louise excitedly.

"But with *you* here—"

"We'll manage." She released herself. On a sudden impulse she picked up the pistol from the table, and thrust it swaggeringly into her deerskin belt. She stepped lightly to the door, pausing a second to glance back, her eyes all a-dance with delight. "May I—?"

She seemed to have some purpose—to be on some sudden quest—eager, alert, yet vaguely troubled, seeking a solution of some question. She was trembling and tense, in spite of her smile and the odd light as of joy in her magical eyes.

"May I?" Such a queer little question.

Crookfinger nodded.

"Who are you?" parleyed Eugenie Louise through the door, one hand on the bar, the other on the butt of the pistol.

"The law!"

"Trooper Tylendonck!" she cried in a voice warm with welcome. And before the brave constable had finished his answer, which was in one syllable, she shot back the bar, flung wide the door, and received the gendarme in an embrace which men would cross seas and deserts to deserve. "Tly!" she shouted, as her arms encircled the broad shoulders. "You dear old hyena, I'm glad to see you!"

But a heavy arm swept her aside like foam. It was as though the gendarme did not see her. As he strode across the threshold into the light from the candle, he levelled his own pistol and covered Crookfinger unerringly.

"Hands up!" The outlaw complied with a shrug. "Come on now, and come slow!"

Crookfinger, brought to bay, said not a word. He took a step forward, his burning eyes fixed on his captor's. By not so much as a flicker of an eyelash did he betray that his companion had instantly shrunk back into the shadow behind Tylendonck. He took another step, and the girl had stolen to the constable's right. And then two small hands caught the hand holding the levelled pistol. Before Tylendonck was aware, the muzzle was canted up, and with a flaming, deafening crash, the pistol was fired harmlessly into the ceiling.

"Now that's attended to," said the lovely heiress, "let's talk together comfortably. Shall we, Tly?"

He winced at the feel of the little pistol pressed against his ribs. He glanced down into the stern, white face.

"You win this round," acknowledged the law with a sigh. "But I'm bound to say, miss, that your aunt would not approve of your behaviour."

"No more do I," agreed the hope of Villa Mirador. "But, under the circumstances—rather dashing, don't you think? Like the stage. Are *you* going to behave?"

"Like a lamb," said the trooper. "I've got to."

"On your word?"

"On the honor of a Royal Rural." And he sat down quite without pride.

"Good egg!" With a sigh of relief, the girl lowered her weapon. She tossed it on the table, and dusted her hands together. "Lucky thing it wasn't loaded," quoth Eugenie Louise. "And now—what do you want here anyhow?"

CHAPTER XXIV

“HIM!” cried the gendarme bitterly, levelling an accusing finger at the master of the house. The latter, curiously enough, had not uttered a word since Tylendonck’s invasion. He kept his back to the light. With folded arms, he shaded his face with his hand. “I’ve been on your trail for months,” said the law, with relish, “and some day, I’ll get you.”

Into the circle of light cast by the guttering candle, Eugenie Louise suddenly leaned forward. She supported herself by her hands set on the table top. Her expression was one of strange intentness, as she looked from the dark shape silhouetted against the yellow glow to the Royal Rural fuming in his chair.

“Listen to me!” she ordered crisply.

Tylendonck inclined his head. “I should imagine,” he said with emotion, “that you’ve got quite an interesting story to tell. More than most young ladies. I seem to remember,” he continued, casting up his eyes to the ceiling as if to seek inspiration, “that you embraced me like a long-lost daughter when I entered. You called me, I think, Tyl—*and a dear old hyena*. Which was only less surprising than being rudely disarmed by you, miss, a moment later.” He brought his eyes down to her level. “And I find you in dreadful company.” He lowered his eyes with a shudder. “And clothed—amazingly. Indeed I will listen as you request. With pleasure. So long as you permit me to keep half an eye on yonder villain.” And planting his chair across the doorway, he sat down all attention. “Why were you so glad to see me?” asked Tylendonck of Eugenie Louise.

"You entered at a very critical moment," she responded evenly.

"Good heavens!" He wagged his head portentously. "You can't trust any young man to mind his manners since the war."

She agreed with a nod. "He—he frightened me."

Still the master of the house was silent. He did not move a finger.

"And yet," observed Tylendonck, "villain though he is, and ruffian—to—to take advantage of your unprotected state—though why the devil you should be here wearing boy's clothes a mile too wide beats me completely—when I was about to capture him neatly and nicely, you interfered most impolitely, and saved your—this person—from his just deserts."

"Who is he?" the girl demanded suddenly.

"Don't *you* know, miss?" the gendarme countered in amaze. "And you here with him, all alone?"

She shook her head. "I'm not sure. He told me he was—he was a former friend of mine, but—"

"Friend of yours? Of a young lady of position and refinement? Impossible! Why, that fellow—"

The man broke his strange silence. "Careful!" he cautioned, in a voice so altered that the girl stared at him, with a new vague terror in her eyes. She drew back. "Can you swear to me?" the man demanded. "Do you know me in the dark? I may be somebody quite other than the rogue you're seeking to arrest. It might be very awkward for you not only to arrest, but even to question me. It might be best for you to make your escape from here as quickly and as gracefully as you can."

Tylendonck shrank within himself. Like the girl, he was baffled and confused by the unexpected ring in the man's voice, by its calm authority, its gentle malice. Like her, he could only stare, gaping.

"None o' that!" he growled, though his heart beat fast with a worry he could not define. "Don't try to bluff the law, for—"

The girl had snatched the candle from the mantel shelf. She set it down on the table in the middle of the room. The man's face showed now as he stood there erect and calm, a light smile on his lips. The girl devoured this stranger with frightened eyes, her hands against her heart.

"Who is that man?" was her sudden fierce cry. "Look at him, Tylendonck!"

But the man turned his eyes not to meet the gendarme's, but to meet the girl's. At sight of her dismay, they lightened softly. To their strange, high look of power and peace succeeded the reckless dash, the whimsical, engaging, brave-hearted, gorgeous grin of the rover, of the gay adventurer she had seen a score of times.

"Yes, tell her!" he cried, facing Tylendonck again.

"You—you're the most abandoned rogue in all the world,"

"What—?"

"I'm sorry to have to say it, miss, but—"

"Go on," the man interrupted. "Get it over with. What have I done?"

"One of the worst crimes he's committed," said Tylendonck severely, "was to beat up Mr. De Souter."

"No! Did he—?"

"And the next worst," the gendarme pursued, ignoring the girl's little cry—was it laughter which colored it?—"was to dump me off'n my horse, and run away to join the army. Just when I had him comfortably arrested," complained Tylendonck, snorting with righteous anger.

"On what charge did you arrest me?"

"Being a vagabond!" cried the law in trumpet tones.

And what followed this revelation was quite enough to reduce a better policeman even than Tylendonck to a state

of amazement bordering on imbecility. For hardly had he pronounced this damning accusation than Eugenie Louise turned to the criminal with a cry of utter joy. Instantly she suppressed it; she shrank back into the shadows, covering her eyes, her cheeks aflame. And the unmasked vagabond, shameless in spite of his disgrace, stepped swiftly to her side; and before Tylendonck's very eyes, he took the heiress of Villa Mirador into his arms. And the girl? She looked up at him with all the love of her heart and her youth speaking from her eyes to him. And the kiss they shared was that which lovers, long separated, have known since lovers were.

"Now do you believe I'm the same?" asked the man.

"Crookfinger! Even though—"

"That was nothing." The vagabond freed one hand, and extended it to the blushing trooper. "Name your own reward, old son!" he cried. "You did the business. Alone I could never have convinced her."

"Convinced her of what?" blinked the trooper.

"Don't you see? He's truly my vagabond, after all," explained Eugenie Louise, very lucidly, I think.

"Speaking of rewards," said Tylendonck modestly, "since the subject has arisen, you may like to know that if I had arrested you just now, and brought you to justice, I was promised a promotion to sergeant-major. Now, if I should marry you to this young lady—"

"What—?"

"The situation," said Tylendonck with decision, "appears to demand it. "As a Royal Rural, I am legally empowered to unite in holy wedlock couples of whose characters and aims I thoroughly approve. But—"

"Who could be nicer than Crookfinger?" the girl asked hotly.

"And could any girl—? But what's the use of talking?" cried the vagabond jubilantly. "Marry me here

and now to this girl of my dreams, and I'll make you a brigadier."

"Better than that," put in Eugenie Louise, "I'll let you kiss the bride."

So there, by candle light, in the little old house where once before they had tasted a strange and sudden happiness, the two were married. The girl who was so very fair and dear, and the man who was everything that life holds best of youth and pluck and gaiety—but who chiefly was Crookfinger. Crookfinger! But, oddly enough, as Eugenie Louise looked down, in a sudden sweet confusion, she saw that the vagabond had placed on her finger a quaint and splendid hoop of antique gold, with a curious colored stone on which were engraved the arms of a little kingdom.

Toward twilight the next afternoon, when the two had come to their senses, the man said in a murmur: "We must go away from here tonight, beloved. For in the morning—"

"Anywhere, with you," the girl replied, lying very still in the fold of his arm.

"To all ends?" he queried wonderingly.

"Since you will always be—you," she answered. Then for a second she hesitated. "But sometimes, in our life of wandering, may we come back to the little house in the woods?"

"Why?" he teased.

"It is here," she reminded him, "that once a little queen—"

"Yes!" agreed the vagabond. "A little queen, beloved. Exactly!" And she wondered what his strange, fond smile could mean.

And that is all there is of the story.

Or stay—! Let us not forget that the excellent De

Soulter was sent, three months later, to be the Governor of Ping-Yang, where, the records all agree, he was much beloved by all the natives under his rule.

For it is not what you are, but what you appear to be to those who love you, which really counts—even in true tales like this one.

THE END





